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MEET THE SCARGIVER

FALLOUT
THE GAME GOES LIVE ACTION

THE FIRST OMEN
DEMON CHILD DRAMA

WORLD EXCLUSIVE!

WRECK
RETURN OF THE BBC HORROR

STAR TREK: DISCOVERY
THE CREW AT THEIR FINAL FRONTIER

DOCTOR WHO
BUILDING A GOBLIN ARMY

ABIGAIL
DANCE WITH THE DEVIL

RENEGADE NELL
TWISTED HIGHWAY ROBBERY

PLUS! IMMACULATE / RESIDENT ALIEN / DOCTOR STRANGE
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À la recherche des *Maîtres Du Temps*, oui?

Captain's Log

Yes, I know we're in a golden age for *Star Trek* – and long may that continue – but I'm very sad to see *Discovery* come to an end with season five. Not least because, as a nerd, my brain is conditioned to think that seven seasons is "correct" for *Trek* (even though that's nonsense!), but because this show truly ushered in that new wave we're currently riding, taking things to a whole new level.

I adore the cast and crew of *Discovery*, along with the publicity team, who I've had the joy of speaking and working with over the years. Of course I realise that with *Star Trek* things are never really *over*, and I hope we'll continue to see the worlds and characters of *Discovery* cross over into series – and films? – to come.

Something else that's coming to an end this month: our *Doctor Who* specials coverage. Yes, I'm afraid that after six issues it's time to move onto something else – namely the long-awaited series one! Yes, we're calling it that. One final hurrah with giggles and goblins and we'll see you back here in four weeks, yeah? Tell your friends – another must-have issue is incoming.

Until then, dig into new worlds with *Rebel Moon: Part Two*, old battles with *Godzilla X Kong* and some familiar evil from the past in several updated horror projects. Let's fly!

Darren
X

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Rants & Raves

Inside the *SFX* hive mind

DARREN SCOTT EDITOR

RAVES

→ *Dune: Part Two* is a breathtaking piece of cinema – I wonder how it will fare with "non-critics"...
→ *Monarch: Legacy Of Monsters* was great. A few more monsters next time and it'll be perfect.
→ Loved *Late Night With The Devil* – wish it had been released in October!

RANTS

→ *Madame Web* isn't a bad movie. I've seen *far* worse superhero films, and that's even in recent years.
→ My *Rentaghost* rewatch is over.

IAN BERRIMAN DEPUTY EDITOR

RAVES

→ They've made scores of (2005+) *Doctor Who* scripts (plus *Torchwood*, *SJA* etc) available on the BBC Writers site (bbc.co.uk/writers/scripts/whoniverse). A fascinating resource, and so much work must have been gone into it. Bravo!
→ Thrilled that Mario Bava's sci-fi/horror *Planet Of The Vampires* is finally getting a Blu-ray release (from Radiance, 27 May). There's never even been a UK DVD, and the old VHS changed hands for a fortune!
→ I wrote about *Jamie And The Magic Torch* last issue, and now they've just released a new DVD box set of all three series. Sometimes I scare myself with my power.

JONATHAN COATES ART EDITOR

RAVES

→ Jonathan van Tulleken is a great choice to direct *Blade Runner 2099* – his work on *Shōgun* has been spectacular.

ED RICKETTS PRODUCTION EDITOR

RAVES

→ Really looking forward to the *Elden Ring* DLC *Shadow Of The Erdtree*. *ER* was the only Soulsborne game I properly clicked with. Here's to another 250 hours...

RANTS

→ How did anyone fall for that obviously AI-generated image supposedly showing David Corenswet in his Superman costume for James Gunn's new film? It was *awful*.

NICK SETCHFIELD EDITOR-AT-LARGE

RAVES

→ I know I'll never get the *Fantastic Four* movie that's in my head, but this new cast is pretty promising. Also liking the rumour of a '60s setting. Just go full Jack Kirby with it!
→ James Gunn's *Superman* also seems to be on the right track. Could 2025 be the year the superhero movie gets its groove back?

TARA BENNETT US EDITOR

RAVES

→ Benedict Wong gets to lead a big-budget, sci-fi series as a badass, noir-y cop... Kudos to *3 Body Problem* for that casting choice. It's about time!
→ Gareth Edwards getting the chance to reboot the *Jurassic World* franchise feels like an inspired choice. Let's hope they leave him to it and don't mess with his vision too much.

THE FUTURE FIRST!

Red Alert

APRIL 2024

→ NEWS //// INTERVIEWS //// INSIGHT //// ECTOPLASM!

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FADE TO GREY

There's a new sheriff in town in *Resident Alien*

Highlights

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IMMACULATE
→ How much joy will a peaceful new convent bring devoutly religious Cecilia? Nun.

10
STAR WARS
→ He's a Mandalorian, but probably not the one you were expecting! Jango Fett takes centre stage.

13
X-MEN '97
→ Nostalgia never lets you grow old, so break out the Wolverine memes for a returning classic.

Sydney Sweeney as Cecilia in Nepi Cathedral.

DIRECTOR EXCLUSIVE

Then There Was Nun

Director Michael Mohan on his new Sydney Sweeney-headlining horror **Immaculate** WORDS: **STEVE O'BRIEN**

BLACK NARCISSUS, *ROSEMARY'S Baby*, *Barbarian*, *What Have You Done To Solange?*, *The Red Queen Kills Seven Times*... These are just some of the films Michael Mohan namechecks when asked about the influences on his latest big-screen offering. While some directors are happy to paddle in horror waters, but have no deep love for the genre, Mohan is absolutely a horror man through and through.

"As a filmmaker, it's the most challenging genre you can work in," he enthuses to Red Alert, "because you need the performances to be grounded, but the filmmaking language is so much more sophisticated in terms of setting up jump scares in a way that the audience doesn't see coming."

In 2021 *The Voyeurs*, Mohan's twisty, erotically-charged thriller for Prime Video, featured Sydney Sweeney as its leading lady. Now he's re-teamed with her for *Immaculate*, a psychological horror about a young woman of devout faith who finds herself offered a place at a convent in the Italian countryside.

"Sydney sent me the script in 2022, and I was really worried I wasn't going to like it," Mohan says of Andrew Lobel's screenplay (Sweeney's production company Fifty-Fifty Films is producing), "but as I was turning the pages I was like, 'Andrew is an undiscovered talent here in the horror space.' This contains scares that I've never seen before. And the reveals that happened in the script... like, I got to a certain page and my mind was blown. I'm someone who writes films with these big twists in them, so I can always see them a mile away, but this one I couldn't. So when I got to the end of the script, I immediately called Sydney and basically begged her to be a part of this project."

Álvaro Morte, playing a not at all sinister character.

Few female actors are as hot at the moment as Sydney Sweeney, so to have the star of *Euphoria* (HBO's drama about high schoolers) headlining a horror is A Big Deal. Mohan first worked with her on comedy-drama *Everything Sucks!*, a Netflix series he co-created with Ben York Jones, and believes *Immaculate* will show off Sweeney's acting skills like no other movie before has.

"She's an actress who can do unhinged like no other actor – I mean, you've seen *Euphoria*

Director Michael Mohan tells his best nun joke.

> **“I’m shocked that they’re allowing us to keep the last two minutes of this movie”**

season two, right?” he says. “But she can also do quiet and subtle really well too. When I read this script I saw the potential to slightly modify the character to someone that gives us this huge arc, where she starts as this altruistic, innocent young woman, and by the end of the movie, turns into an absolutely feral creature.

“I’m lucky to work with an actor who really wants to go there,” he continues. “When Sydney approached me with this, she was like, ‘I want to cover myself in blood from head to toe, I want this to be as brutal as humanly possible.’ I give so much credit to her for wanting to go there because we did. Quite frankly, I’m shocked that they’re allowing us to keep the last two minutes of this movie!”

In the finished film, Sweeney’s character Cecilia, is, like the actor herself, a woman in her mid-twenties. In the original script, however, the character was a fresh-out-of-school teenager.

“The thing I had to delicately tell Sydney is that she can do anything as an actor, but I just didn’t think that audiences would buy her as a high school virgin, especially considering the movies that she and I have made together!” Mohan laughs.

“So my idea was to make her a nun. It suited the circumstances the most and it also allowed us to take this character from point A to point B, and a more extreme arc.”

At the time of our interview, Mohan is one month away from *Immaculate*’s first public airing, at Texas’ South By Southwest film festival. When we ask if he’s apprehensive, he simply smiles and tells us he feels like “a little kid waiting for Christmas morning.

“Our first screening is in front of 1,300 people,” he says excitedly, “and the end of this movie is truly shocking. I just can’t wait to feel the energy in that room when the film finally cuts to black, that’s all I’ll say...”

Beyond *Immaculate*, Mahon says he’s keen to direct more horror, and is at the moment working on a movie with the makers of *M3GAN*. “What I really want to do is I just want to make sure that I can top this film,” he says. “In the same way that this really, really tops what we did with *The Voyeurs*, I want the next one to go even darker, and go to even more extreme places. That’s my goal!”

“Um, actually, I think I might have changed my mind.”

Immaculate is in cinemas from 22 March.

SCI-FACT! **Some location filming took place at Rome’s Palazzo Doria Pamphilj, home to a private art collection.**

NEWS WARP

HIGH-SPEED INFORMATION

- Marvel’s **Fantastic Four** cast is finally official: Pedro Pascal is Mr Fantastic, Vanessa Kirby the Invisible Woman, Joseph Quinn the Human Torch and Ebon Moss-Bachrach the Thing.
- Tim Burton directing **Attack Of The Fifty Foot Woman** remake from a script by *Gone Girl*’s Gillian Flynn.
- Milly Alcock is **Supergirl** in James Gunn’s DC cinematic universe.
- Destin Daniel Cretton directing live-action anime adap **Naruto**.
- Christoph Waltz and Caleb Landry-Jones in the frame for Luc Besson’s **Dracula**.
- Sophie Turner and Kit Harington reuniting on 15th century horror **The Dreadful**.
- *Infested*’s Sébastien Vaniček helming new instalment of the **Evil Dead** franchise.
- Ewan McGregor and Anne Hathaway joining untitled dinosaur adventure by David Robert Mitchell.
- Stephen King’s 1979 book **The Dead Zone** is set for a big-screen remake.
- *Godzilla*’s Gareth Edwards in line to direct the new **Jurassic World** movie.

DAVID M. BENETT/DAVE BENETT/GETTY

Alan Tudyk as Harry Vanderspeigle: cheese!

SHOWRUNNER EXCLUSIVE

Strange Love

Resident Alien creator Chris Sheridan explains Harry's next stage of evolution in season three

WORDS: **TARA BENNETT**

AS SEASON THREE OF *RESIDENT Alien* approaches its finale, let us reflect on alien Harry Vanderspeigle's (Alan Tudyk) primary life lessons this year: love and heartbreak. Who could have imagined Harry ever getting soppy considering that, for two seasons, the alien of unpronounceable origins has been stuck on Earth trying to finish his mission of destroying the planet?

Yet once he took on a human guise to assimilate into the quirky town of Patience, Colorado, Harry has been doomed to gain more humanity with every life experience.

"Putting Harry through that grinder felt like the right thing to do in this season," series creator Chris Sheridan tells Red Alert. "Each of the seasons lays out a different stage of his development. In season one, he's almost like a baby, learning how to walk and talk.

"Season two was like early adolescence, where he's going out and finding more friends. It then dawned on me, the very natural place for him to be in season three is a teenager, where he's rejecting the parents – rejecting Asta (Sara Tomko), who's like the parental figure – finding independence, and in this case, finding love."

In this eight-episode season, the middle section has focused on Harry turning into a

Judy Cooper (Jenna Lamia): insert your own joke.

Alice Wetterlund is matchmaker D'Arcy Bloom.

Enver Gjokaj plays fellow alien Joseph Rainier.

> **Putting Harry through the grinder felt like the right thing to do this season**

smitten kitten for Heather (Edi Patterson), the first Blue Avian alien on the series. She arrived at the end of episode three, "141 Seconds", as a representative from the Galactic Federation, serving Harry with a summons to leave Earth. But thanks to some subterfuge by D'Arcy (Alice Wetterlund), she stuck around to make Harry's heart go pitter patter.

"He has known love in this series, but this is a different type of love. As Harry says, it is not love in his head and his heart, like Asta is to him. It's love in his pants," the showrunner laughs. Sheridan says that they found the right actress to play the subject of Harry's infatuation from Tudyk's recommendation.

"He had mentioned doing improv at one point in Los Angeles with Edi Patterson, who he said was the funniest person he'd ever worked with, and that's high praise coming from Alan. There are very few people who can go toe to toe with Alan. They are incredible together and have great chemistry."

Heather also serves another purpose this season in terms of expanding the alien species featured within the show, which now includes whatever Harry is, Blue Avians and the Greys. Sheridan says that it was his choice to take three seasons to "earn" his ambition to introduce other species. "Harry is this alien that comes down to Earth, but he's not the only one," he explains of what he personally believes as a researcher of alien sightings and abduction stories.

"Taking Harry out of this equation altogether, this stuff is still happening. It's very prevalent," he says. "So, it would make sense in this show to not have Harry be the only alien influence on this world."

What's been uncovered by Harry and Asta is that the Greys have their own nefarious plan for planet Earth: a plot involving a massive underground caldera in Yellowstone. And they've been appearing in Patience, like they did to Deputy Liv (Elizabeth Bowen), or abducting residents like Mayor Ben (Levi Fiehler) and his wife Kate (Meredith Garretson).

"Revealing that Ben has been abducted since he was a child, and that caused this fearfulness, was something that I always wanted to do," Sheridan says. "It's been a long time coming. But I think it's also rewarding when it happens because suddenly, you understand why he is who he is."

In the last two episodes, Sheridan says everyone in the ensemble cast will be positioned for some incendiary moments. "It doesn't end with a cliffhanger. It ends with about *five* cliffhangers," he promises. "There's either a big turn or reveal for all the characters. There's a lot going on as we get to the end."

Sheridan adds he hopes the cliffhangers compel Syfy to keep investing in their unique brand of emotional sci-fi with a renewal. "I don't think I could wrap this up in one more season," he says. "I would need two more seasons to wrap it up.

"We could go longer than that, potentially. But I've spent a lot of time thinking about that because you never know. What I don't ever want to happen is for the show to get old before we tell the whole story."

Resident Alien is on Syfy and NOW.

SCI-FACT! **Genre favourite actor Terry O'Quinn returned this season to finish his arc as podcaster Peter Bach.**

NEWS WARP
HIGH-SPEED INFORMATION

- Nicolas Cage in talks to star in Amazon's live-action **Spider-Man Noir** series, spinning off from *Into The Spider-Verse*.
- **Percy Jackson And The Olympians** renewed for a second season.
- HBO developing *Game Of Thrones* saga **Aegon's Conquest**, a prequel to *House Of The Dragon*.
- *Shogun*'s Jonathan van Tulleken directing the opening two episodes of **Blade Runner 2099**.
- **Bewitched** set for a revival by *The Boys*' Judalina Neira.
- Troy Kotsur joining season three of **Foundation** as Preem Palver.
- **Invasion** scores a third season on Apple TV+.
- *American Horror Story*'s Ryan Murphy returns with **Grotesquerie** this autumn. Ryan Murphy stars alongside Niecy Nash-Betts, Courtney B Vance and Lesley Manville.
- Season four of **The Boys** begins 13 June on Prime Video.
- Max's **Harry Potter** series targeting a 2026 debut.
- Fourth and final season of **The Umbrella Academy** hits Netflix on 8 August.

AMANDA EDWARDS/GETTY

SCI-FACT! **Jango Fett previously appeared in the 2002 miniseries *Open Seasons*, written by Haden Blackman and drawn by Ramon F Bachs.**

One variant cover for issue one, by Derrick Chew.

WRITER EXCLUSIVE

Hitman And Her

Jango Fett faces off against Aurra Sing in his new Marvel miniseries

WORDS: **STEPHEN JEWELL**

WITH *BOUNTY Hunters* coming to a close with issue 42, comics writer Ethan Sacks is now spinning out another mercenary into his own miniseries. After juggling *Bounty Hunters*' ensemble cast, he is instead focusing on one central character, Mandalorian Jango Fett.

"Jango Fett is one of my all-time favourite characters from the *Star Wars* franchise," Sacks tells Red Alert. "I feel he has been eclipsed by his son in recent years because of *The Book Of Boba Fett* and *The Mandalorian* and the time that has passed since the prequels, but he is just as cool as I remember him."

Taking place at the height of his career, the four-parter showcases Jango at his very best. "What I love about Jango Fett, particularly at this point in his timeline – before Kamino and the responsibilities of fatherhood – is that he's a warrior at the top of his game, so we're seeing him in his prime, at a time when this 'simple man just trying to make (his) way through the universe' is building his legend one bounty at a time," explains Sacks, paraphrasing one of Jango's speeches from *Attack Of The Clones*.

> **"The theft of a symbolic relic has caused a major crisis"**

Having previously included Boba in *Bounty Hunters*' line-up, Sacks appreciates the contrast between the elder and junior Fett. "Jango is certainly more well-adjusted than Boba during the original trilogy era when he's carrying a lot of emotional baggage from the horrific loss of his father and the void that left, so no wiping the floor with Valance is going to fill that," he says, referring to the cyborg assassin, who was another of *Bounty Hunters*' main protagonists.

"He's had to raise himself, and all that makes Boba a darker character with which to play."

As previewed in the recent *Star Wars: Revelations*, Jango is recruited to track down those behind the disappearance of a sacred artefact, which could have serious repercussions for the galaxy if it is not located. "The theft of a symbolic relic called the Hope of Glee Anselm has caused a

major diplomatic crisis," teases Sacks. "Nothing, however, is as it seems and not everyone wants the statue found or the culprit revealed. There will be some pretty cool cameos and a new badass rival along the way as forces align against Jango."

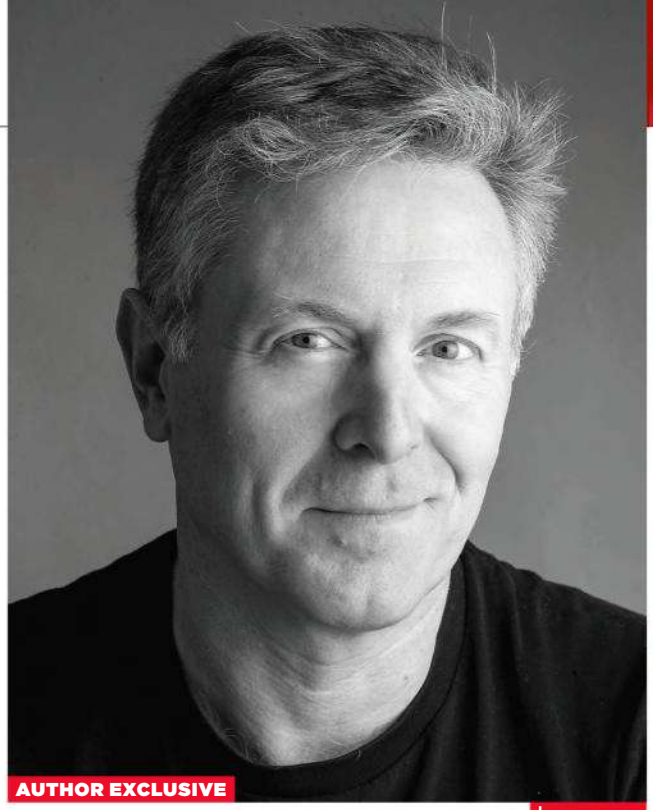
Jango is pitted against former Jedi turned freebooter Aurra Sing. "I love writing Aurra Sing as an assassin whose greatest asset is her mind, having previously gotten the chance for an issue of *Halcyon Legacy*," says Sacks, referring to the 2022 Marvel miniseries. "There are few bounty hunters in that or any other era that can give Jango Fett a run for his money, but she is definitely one of them."

Having previously worked together on 2019's *The Rise Of Skywalker* prequel *Star Wars: Allegiance*, Sacks is enjoying collaborating once again with artist Luke Ross.

"Luke and I found a good rhythm on *Allegiance* and reuniting on this series, it was like no time has passed," he says. "Luke's art on *Jango Fett* is so cinematic, especially with Nolan Woodard's colours, making every page even more dynamic."

Star Wars: Jango Fett issue one is out on 20 March.

Another cover variant, this one by Luke Ross.



AUTHOR EXCLUSIVE

James Lovegrove, writing Strange prose.

Book Of Magic

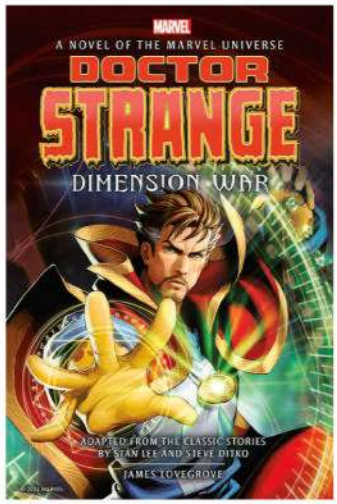
Doctor Strange's rise to Sorcerer Supreme is revisited in new novel **Dimension War**

WORDS: **STEPHEN JEWELL**

AFTER HIS TWO recent big-screen outings, Stephen Strange is now making the transition to novels with James Lovegrove's *Dimension War*, which is based on the original '60s stories by Stan Lee, Steve Ditko and Roy Thomas. Lovegrove admits that it wasn't easy recreating the Master of Mystic Arts' formative comic book adventures without the all-important visuals.

"Writing superhero stories in prose words, without the art for support, is doable but not easy," he tells Red Alert. "The trick, for me, was making the narrative as dynamic and visual as I could, so as to replicate the pace and feel of a good superhero comic, while at the same time relying on all the elements that prose fiction does best – such as internal monologues, point of view narrative and long exchanges of dialogue. What wasn't easy was conveying a sense of Ditko's art with its hallucinatory imagery, spooky angles, mangled anatomy and overall downright oddness. My solution was to play with typography in a couple of sections of the book, to show that text could be twisted about and messed with just as, in Ditko's hands, the content of a comic book panel could."

Lovegrove reshaped over 30 individual comics, initially published over the course of three years, into a single, overarching storyline. "It wouldn't be unfair to say that in those early issues, brilliant and ground-breaking as they were, Stan and Steve were pretty much making it up as they went along," he says, before Roy Thomas established a larger plot arc after taking over scripting from Lee with *Strange Tales* 146.


MARVEL
A NOVEL OF THE MARVEL UNIVERSE
DOCTOR STRANGE
DIMENSION WAR
ADAPTED FROM THE CLASSIC STORIES BY STAN LEE AND STEVE DITKO
JAMES LOVEGROVE

"Roy managed to pull the strands together into quite a satisfying conclusion," continues Lovegrove. "What I had to do with *Dimension War* was follow the outline of the successive issues as closely as I could, without it starting to come across all episodic and bitty.

"For Doctor Strange himself, I had to figure out a character arc that could run through the length of the novel, but I soon realised it's pretty much there already in the comics: a man rediscovering his purpose in life and emerging from the shadows to become Earth's magical defender."

Lovegrove also attempted to give greater depth to the main villains. "With Mordo, I leaned into the idea of him being an Old World aristocrat type who distrusts and despises Strange's brash new American ways, as I felt this would be fun and make for an interesting contrast between the two of them.

"I made Nightmare into a pitiable figure, who is evil for sure but I introduced some pathos as well. As for Dormammu, the book's Big Bad, I wanted him to have the weirdly dignified arrogance of a dictator who honestly thinks he's doing the best for the people under him, even if it means making them suffer."

Doctor Strange: Dimension War is out on 26 March.

SCI-FACT! **The issues that Lovegrove drew on include *Strange Tales* 110-111 and 114-146, from 1963 to 1965.**

SCI-FACT! The first ***Ghostbusters*** comics were ***The Real Ghostbusters*** tie-ins, launched in 1988 by Now Comics and Marvel UK.

CREATOR EXCLUSIVE

Phantom Menace

Dark Horse miniseries sets the scene for the new **Ghostbusters** blockbuster WORDS: **STEPHEN JEWELL**

Blue Delliquanti's cover art for issue one.

WHILE THEY'RE ALREADY ensconced in the Ghostbusters' iconic firehouse in the upcoming *Frozen Empire*, new comic series *Back In Town* begins with the Spenglers having just relocated from Oklahoma to the Big Apple.

"The great part about *Back In Town* is that it kind of straddles both existing and new parts of this world," says writer David Booher. "It's set between *Afterlife* and *Frozen Empire* and it follows the Spenglers now that they're back in New York. But we've gotten the freedom to tell a standalone story, so you'll see hints of the movies and you'll also see fun new ghouls and new facets of the Spenglers."

"What I found particularly interesting was the way the new series was reintroducing New York City, which was such a fundamental element of the original films," adds artist Blue Delliquanti. "But because these characters aren't familiar with the city or the firehouse the way the original crew was, I tried to treat those settings as worthy of a reintroduction."

WELCOME TO THE DOLLHOUSE

While according to Booher "they've been involved in the scripts right from the start," both he and Delliquanti liaised constantly with Jason Reitman and his co-screenwriter/*Frozen Empire*'s director Gil Kenan. "They were helpful in sending me the reference materials I needed to draw the interior of the Ghostbusters' firehouse – especially the big two-page spread in the first issue where you see every room dollhouse-style," says Delliquanti.

"I had architectural diagrams and behind-the-scenes photos of all of the rooms, and there were a lot of fun details that went into the new crew's work on the firehouse that I tried to include in the background."

Delliquanti was also provided with details of the various Ghostbusters paraphernalia, including their classic car, the Ectomobile. But that wasn't enough... "I received photos of the car on the set of the new film so I could study the details, but if I wanted to draw it from an unusual angle I looked up Lego models built and displayed by fans over the years, which let me be a little braver with the composition," he adds.

The artist found capturing the numerous likenesses a different kind of challenge. "I wanted them to be recognisable as the actors playing them, but I'm also simplifying and exaggerating them to make them more expressive in the comics format – so Phoebe's got a lot of soft, round features while Trevor's angular and all arms and legs. The legacy characters are easier to make recognisable because they've already got their distinctive features – Gary [Paul Rudd] was surprisingly the most difficult!"

Menaced by an entity that in Booher's words "wants to see them fail as a team and as a family", the four-parter finds Phoebe, Trevor and their mother struggling to cope with their newfound situation.

"There's a lot of adjustments that come with moving to a new home, and everybody in the Spengler family has their own challenges to deal with!" teases Delliquanti.

Variant cover art for the first issue, by Steve Morris.

Ghostbusters: Back In Town issue one is out on 27 March.

SCI-FACT! **Published from 1992-1997, spin-off comic *X-Men Adventures* adapted the first three seasons of *X-Men: The Animated Series*.**

WRITER EXCLUSIVE

Wraparound cover for issue one, by Russell Dauterman.

That '90s Comic

Steve Foxe and Salva Espín return for **X-Men '97** prequel

WORDS: **STEPHEN JEWELL**

AHEAD OF THE release of *X-Men '97*, Disney+'s continuation of *X-Men: The Animated Series*, Marvel Comics are publishing a special comic book spin-off written by Steve Foxe and drawn by Salva Espín. They previously teamed up on 2022's *X-Men '92: House Of XCII*, which was based on the classic '90s show.

"I would be on a drastically different life path if not for *X-Men: The Animated Series*, which, combined with the blitz of Toy Biz action figures in the early '90s, made me a mutie lover for life. So I was beyond thrilled when Beau DeMayo asked for Salva and I to reunite on *X-Men '97*," says Foxe, referring to the new television show's executive producer. "Beau had read *X-Men '92: House Of XCII* and thought we'd be a natural fit."

Unlike *House Of XCII*, which was set "in its own distinctive continuity," the four-parter directly leads into the upcoming cartoon. "The big difference with *'97* is that Salva and I have actually been unleashed in the *Animated Series* continuity now, working closely with the production team at Marvel Animation to match designs, locations and events," explains Foxe.

"When Beau gives us notes, he's pointing us towards episodes of the original show for references and nods, and even some pay-off for threads that never got picked up anywhere else. When there was a difference between a character's comic costume, they look like how they did on the show."

While according to Foxe "you can watch the new series fresh", reading the comic as well will provide invaluable additional background information. "It'll enrich your knowledge of where the team's been and how some of the wild new status quo fell into place," he continues. "Our miniseries directly sets up stories being told in the first few episodes of the new series, and will exclusively reveal some of the backstory that occurs between the final episodes of the original cartoon and the launch of the new series. I also get to introduce some of my favourite '90s X-villains to the cartoon continuity for the first time, so my love of the comics of the era is reflected here too."

One of the covers for issue two, by Todd Nauck.

The X-Men's line-up is "as classic as it gets", with Jean Grey, Storm, Cyclops, Rogue, Gambit, Beast, Jubilee, Wolverine and Bishop making up the core cast. "Viewers of the original show know Bishop joined right near the end, so this will be one of the first places you get to see him interact with the full squad," teases Foxe, who adds that the Merry Mutants are pitted against Mr Sinister.

"Nathaniel Essex has wicked plans for a pair of X-Men, but he's not doing the dirty work himself. Fans of the show know Sinister played a substantial role, and his Nasty Boys got more love on the cartoon than they ever did in the comics. I'm excited to use Hairbag and gang, but we didn't stop there, as some super '90s villains who never appeared in the cartoon make their animated debut!"

X-Men '97 issue one is out on 27 March.

Colin Baker introduces *Into The TARDIS*.

Get ready for the epic *Dark Gallifrey*.

Tom Baker and cast members from *Metamorphosis*.

SFX

SPACE AND TIME

NEWS FROM THE WORLD OF DOCTOR WHO

◆ New cast members for series one – coming in May – have been announced: Genesis Lynea (*Shadow And Bone*, *A Discovery Of Witches*) and Gwïon Morris Jones (*The Winter King*).

◆ **New directors have also been announced: Amanda Brotchie (*Gentlemen Jack*) and Makalla McPherson (*EastEnders*).**

◆ BBC Writers joined the Whoniverse last month, with a dedicated section in the Script Library area on their website. It hosts over 200 scripts from various *Doctor Who* productions, with more to follow.

◆ **Demon Records have released details of their vinyl offering for Record Store Day 2024, taking place on 20 April. "The Edge Of Destruction" – available as a 12" zoetrope picture disc – includes the complete televised soundtrack, with new linking narration and interview from Carole Ann Ford. A CD version is planned for release in May.**

◆ BBC Audio also have a raft of releases planned for 2024, including novelisation readings for "Kinda" (narrated by Janet Fielding), "The Horns Of Nimon" (narrated by Geoffrey Beevers and John Leeson), "Destiny Of The Daleks" and *Harry Sullivan's War*. "Snakedance" follows in 2025.

◆ ***The Apocalypse Collection* features TV stories narrated by Maureen O'Brien, Peter Purves, John Leeson and Nicholas Briggs. A second volume of *Eleventh Doctor Novels* collects four more books.**

◆ New adventures are also planned, including Fifth Doctor story *The Resurrection Plant* by Will Hadlock and Eighth Doctor story *The Force Of Death* by Andrew Lane. Also coming soon are *The Demons Within* by Gary Russell (Tenth Doctor, read by David Banks) and *River Of Death* by John Peel (Sixth Doctor, Nicola Bryant).

◆ **Deep breath for Big Finish, the most frequent visitor to the *SFX* inbox... New releases include *The Fourth Doctor Adventures: Metamorphosis*, coming in June, which pits Tom Baker against Annette Badland as the Toymaker. The Fourth Doctor also appears in the April box set *The Casebook Of Paternoster Row*, which reunites Madame Vastra (Neve McIntosh), Jenny (Catrin Stewart) and Strax (Dan Starkey) for three brand new mysteries.**

◆ An epic 24-part (!) story kicks off in April when *Dark Gallifrey* begins with the first of eight trilogies, these ones focussing on Morbius, played by Samuel West. Paul McGann returns as the Eighth Doctor for three new stories in April, released as box set *Echoes*, while *Missy: Bad Influence* releases in May with three new adventures starring Michelle Gomez.

The Casebook Of Paternoster Row cast.

◆ **Big Finish also announced a brand new official podcast: *Into The TARDIS*, which showcases fan-favourite stories from their 25-year history, launched in March and is available weekly wherever you listen to podcasts.**

Doctor Who is on BBC iPlayer and Disney+.

SCI-FACT! ***Harry Sullivan's War* – by Ian Marter – was the second of three *The Companions Of Doctor Who* spin-off novels.**

PSYCHO CIRCUS

You just can't keep murderous aliens in fancy dress down! Over 35 years since cult classic *Killer Klowns From Outer Space* was released, they're back in a new multiplayer horror videogame releasing in June across multiple platforms. But will you harvest humans or save them? Pass the candy floss...

Visit killerklownsthegame.com

DESERT POWER

A new *Dune* movie means yet another Hans Zimmer soundtrack release, but you've probably never seen one quite as beautifully crafted as this. *Dune: Part Two* has a stunning package illustrated by Greg Ruth. The two-disc set features a rigid plastic printed outer slipcase, quadruple fold-out gatefold sleeve, two printed inner sleeves, 140g black vinyl and a booklet featuring liner notes by Hans Zimmer and Denis Villeneuve.

Visit madebymutant.com

DRAGON BREATH

Be the envy of your neighbours as you walk your Monsterverse *Godzilla X Kong* remote control 1:12 heat-ray breath Godzilla figure down the street. At almost two feet long and with various lights, sounds and, yes, breath, he's pretty damn cool.

A range of other beasts from the movie are available too.

Visit smythstoys.com

SILVER STARS

To mark 25 years of collaborating with *Star Wars*, Lego has unveiled plans for a year-long celebration. Already announced releases, featuring an anniversary logo, include a new Starship Collection line with the Millennium Falcon and the Invisible Hand, two sets inspired by the Tantive IV ship, and a special anniversary build honouring R2-D2.

Visit lego.com/star-wars

SCI-FACT! **Minifigures of *Star Wars* characters "never seen before in Lego form" will be released as part of the 25th anniversary.**

SCI-FACT! **Under the pseudonym Colin Wedgelock, Christopher Priest novelised the film *Short Circuit* in 1986.**

THE FINAL FRONTIER

CHRISTOPHER PRIEST 1943-2024

Remembering the dreamer of the Archipelago

WORDS: **NICK SETCHFIELD**

"I CAN NO LONGER TAKE A PLOT seriously enough to go with it as a bare plot," said novelist Christopher Priest in 1995. "I'm always thinking: where's the flaw in this, where does the idea leak? Unreliability soon starts creeping in, and I cheer up no end."

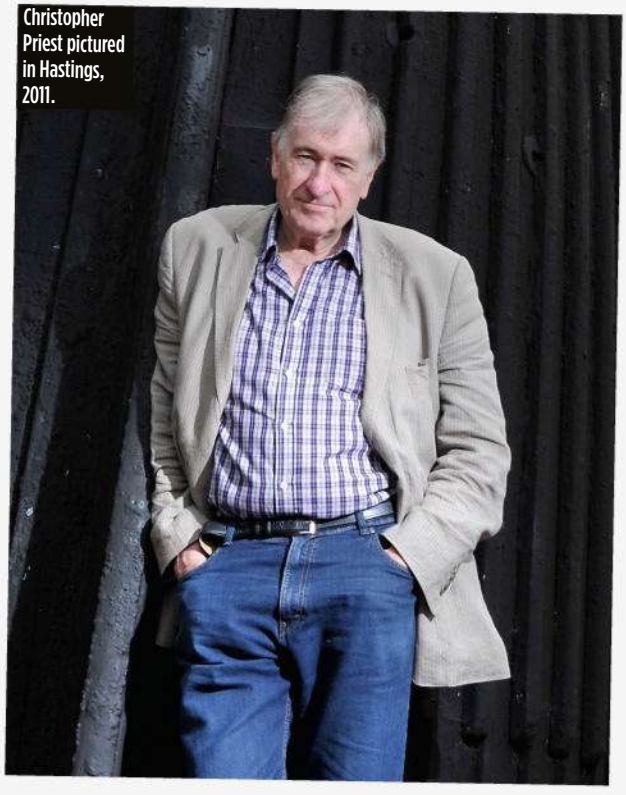
An expert in subversion, Priest dealt in delusions and misrememberings, taking readers to sideways worlds and dislocated realities. Born in Cheadle, Cheshire, he grew up reading science fiction but always resisted being boxed in by the genre. Part of the British New Wave literary scene, his contemporaries included JG Ballard, an admitted influence on his own slippery narratives that teased and pushed the possibilities of mainstream fiction.

Priest's first short story "The Run" was published in 1966. Two years later he left a career in accountancy to write full time. Debut novel *Indoctrinaire* (1970) was followed by *Fugue For A Darkening Island* (1972), establishing his fascination with a fragmenting near-future Britain, a theme further explored in 1977's *A Dream Of Wessex*.

Priest would, in time, build a canon of stories around the Dream Archipelago, the unmappable realm of scattered islands that so perfectly defined his spirit as a writer.

1976's *The Space Machine: A Scientific Romance* was an ingenious mash-up of HG Wells's *The Time Machine* and *The War Of The Worlds* while 1995's *The Prestige*, the story of rival Victorian illusionists, was later adapted for the big screen by Christopher Nolan. In 2002 Priest won the Arthur C Clarke Award for alternate history WWII tale *The Separation*. His final novel, *Airside*, was published in 2023.

Remembering the creation of 1974's *Inverted World*, Priest shared what might well have been the secret to all his writing: "What I had to do is creep around the idea and take it by surprise."



Christopher Priest pictured in Hastings, 2011.

ROB MONK / SFX

PAUL NEARY 1949-2024

Comic artist, writer and Marvel UK editor, known for *Doctor Who* and *The Ultimates*.

BRIAN LUMLEY 1937-2024

British horror author, best known for the *Necroscope* series of novels.

NEW AUTHOR

ROGBA PAYNE

MEET THE LAWYER BEHIND AFRICA-INSPIRED FANTASY *THE DANCE OF SHADOWS*

Tell us about your protagonist.
→ When the story begins, Rumi (short for Irumide) is an aspiring drummer but a deadly encounter with a godhunter called the Priest of Vultures changes everything. Dominated by fear and shame, he has to face up to a daunting destiny to become a Shadowwielder.

How does "Shadowwielding" work?
→ It involves putting your mind through acute strain and confronting repressed emotions in exchange for the power to turn your shadow into physical substances (like swords), amplify strength and increase speed. Think Carl Jung's individuation theory meets *Hunter X Hunter*.

Did you have any specific inspiration?
→ Absolutely! Years ago, I found a book written by my great-great-grandfather: *Table Of Principal Events In Yoruba History*. It's an almanac of the history and culture of the Yoruba tribe, detailing their creative and spiritual complexity. That was a eureka moment.

How does this world relate to Africa?
→ Africa is home to the most beautiful lies and the ugliest truths. I've tried to hold a light to that. There's tribal conflict, colonial struggle, family resilience and vibrant music – themes stitched into the fabric of Africa.

Any advice for would-be authors?
→ Keep writing! We need the dreamers, the comics, the poets and witness-bearers in a time where it's a little too cool to be a cynic. We need more (thoughtful) words and less silence.

The Dance Of Shadows is out on 18 April, published by Gollancz.

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THE FINAL FRONTIER

SHOWRUNNER MICHELLE PARADISE ON THE LAST TRIP FOR STAR TREK: DISCOVERY

WORDS: **DARREN SCOTT**

THEY BOLDLY WENT FROM *The Original Series* timeline of the 23rd century, rewrote Starfleet history and jumped over 900 years to the 32nd century. But the story is ending – for now – as the crew of the USS Discovery find themselves grounded with the fifth and final season of *Star Trek: Discovery*. Showrunner and writer Michelle Paradise sat down with *SFX* to give some insight into what that means for their untimely end.

Why is this the final season of *Discovery*?
Oh, gosh! I think those are a lot of decisions that are made above my head. We just found out that it was going to be the end, actually, after we had completely shot what was only originally going to be the fifth season. I can't thank enough [our] studio and network partners for giving us the opportunity – once they had decided this was going to be the end, and once they had told us – to go and shoot some additional material so that we could wrap up the series as a whole and have it feel like a series end.

I'm sure, as you know, that's most often not the case when a show ends. It's just, "Well, whatever you've done, that's the ending." They are so aware of the impact of this show and how much people love it and what it means. So it's a very uncommon thing to allow showrunners to go back and do some additional work to really tie it up in a satisfying way and I'm so grateful. I know Alex [Kurtzman] is too. We all are that they gave us the chance to do that.

Was that something that you were able to weave throughout the season? Or is it something that comes towards the end?
I don't wanna reveal what it is specifically. But interestingly enough, the season itself, we didn't have to change. We shot some additional material, we didn't re-shoot anything, and save for a couple of tiny tweaks in the finale we didn't have to re-edit anything.

We've sort of said amongst ourselves that if this were to happen in any season, this was – in terms of the storytelling – this was the season for that to have happened, because it still feels like a complete story, particularly since we got to add some additional things. But in terms of the thematics and what our character journeys are, and where we were going over the course of the season we added to, we didn't have to change anything.

So I think, honestly, for people who come into the season not knowing that we didn't find out, they wouldn't know that we didn't go in planning for this.

Did you get to do an extended episode for the finale?
We did, yes. It's definitely a longer episode, for sure.

The crew of the Discovery line up one last time.

Had you planned ahead for season six?
Just in my own work, whenever we finish a season, and the shooting is behind us, I give it a couple of weeks and then, just because of the timing of everything, I have to start thinking about the next season to come, because we have to ramp up so quickly because the lead times are so long.

So I had already started that process and started talking with Alex about what that might be. So we had a general sense, but it was still a very, very early stage. Nothing was fully formed. But I will say that, again, being able to go back and shoot some additional material allowed us to wrap things up in a way that feels very satisfying, and that I think we would have wanted to do, regardless of when the show ended.

Is there an opportunity for *Discovery* to live in another format?
I think that's all up to Alex, and [Kurtzman's production company] Secret Hideout and CBS Studios and Paramount+. Spoiler alert: all of our heroes don't die at the end. So they live on. We have this timeframe. We have these wonderful characters, and I mean, who knows? If they wanted to do that, and if the actors →

Elias Toufexis as L'ak and Eve Harlow as Malinne Ravel.

wanted to do it, I think that's certainly a possibility. There are so many wonderful stories that we *have* told, and so many other stories that we *could* tell if there's a desire to do that. But I also feel like, if this were truly the end of *Discovery* and these characters, that the end of season five will feel very satisfying for what it is.

Showrunners always say the latest season is bigger, but season five really does ramp up the scale...

I really appreciate hearing that. That's something that we strive for every season. We have conversations about it. How can we make this season bigger, better, bolder than the last? From the very beginning of this show Alex has said, "Every episode a movie". So that is something that we think about for any individual episode, and then, of course, wanting every season to be bigger.

Going into this season, season four was the first season we had the AR wall, which is an incredible technology. We really learned how to use it in that season. Season five, because we had the basics of it, we were really able to push that technology along with our partners to limits that we didn't even know we could get

> "We talked about it internally as being an Indiana Jones-style sort of adventure"

to. We just pushed it beyond. There are some things that you'll see in the first episode... the opening sequence, the sand runner sequence is another one where you just feel like you're there. And that was all shot on our AR wall.

Olatunde [Osunsanmi] is, of course, a masterful director. Jason Zimmerman, our VFX guru. The entire team at Pixomondo, who does the AR wall – it's just an incredible group effort to make that work, and it looks like they were there. That's just one example of the ways in which, as a team, we were able to push that technology and go bigger, more adventurous, to get all of those things.

Each season had a different form. What's been your favourite?

I honestly don't know that I could pick a favourite, but I will say that season five has been one of the most fun in terms of having this incredible technology at our disposal, the storytelling itself, the adventure of it all. I don't want to say too much about the season, because I don't want to give any spoilers away, but we do know that our heroes are going on a quest.

We talked about it internally as being an Indiana Jones-style sort of adventure, and just that by its very nature is a heck of a lot of fun.

CAPTAIN'S CALL

Sonequa Martin-Green on donning the Starfleet uniform for the last time

It's bittersweet, because *Discovery* really shouldn't be ending.

That's really touching to hear you say that. It's been quite an emotional roller coaster, because we didn't know that it was going to be our last season when we were shooting. So we got both experiences, where we didn't know, it was just another season, it was there. There's a great deal of fun and a sense of adventure, and all of that – a tonal shift, if you will, in season five.

So we were all just vibing with that, and then we found out after the fact. But we also did get the experience of knowing that this is the last time we're ever gonna do this. It's been quite a while since we shot, so there's been time to process, and it's obviously bittersweet, but I feel a great sense of peace and joy and gratitude for the whole experience.

What was it like coming back to do additional scenes?

It had been a few months since we had wrapped season five, when we found out. It was an experience that I'll always cherish, that I'll never forget. It was so full. It was so heavy. But it was also light as well, if that makes sense. It felt like all of those things rolled into one, and the beauty of it is that we were in it together.

We ended the way we began, the way we always were. We all felt it together. We all felt the sort of sharpness of it and the size of it as well. We would call out pretty much every time there was a "last time". We would hug, we would shed some tears. It was huge. I think back on it and it kind of chokes me up even now, when I think about that last take and I remember [director] Olatunde's voice when he said, "Okay, and now for the last time for *Star Trek: Discovery*, action."

What did you think about the additional material?

I was *floored*. Our showrunners, Michelle and Alex, really went to bat for us, and thankfully CBS and Paramount+ allowed us to have that, and we were deeply grateful for that.

I felt like they had an impossible task before them to wrap up this entire show in such a short period of time, with such a short amount of pages. It seems that they did it in a day and like I said they did it in a handful of pages, and we did it in a handful of days.

So I have a lot of respect for them, and I'm grateful for how they wrapped it up. I think they did it with a gentle touch, but also with specificity, with intention and with poetry as well. Of course there are so many things that I wish we had had the time to see. There are stories I would have wanted to seek, all the characters I would have wanted to touch. But we just had such limited space and such limited time. But my hat's off to them, my hat's off to what Michelle and the writers were able to do.

It's not all about endings. This season seems even bigger. Especially some of the visual effects!

That's exactly right – the AR wall, yo! Mindblowing, indeed! We took it to another level. Even though what we dealt with in season three and especially season four was so big, we've gone even bigger. They really wanted that sense of adventure, that sense of fun, that levity. They wanted that tonal shift and we definitely did that. But then, at the same time, we're dealing with arguably the biggest things you can deal with in season five.

It was an interesting journey for all of us, and it was an especially interesting journey for me. I can't really say because I don't want to spoil anything. But there were some struggles that I had personally with the subject matter, because it is... you'll see. Everyone will see how big it is.

But I appreciate that we just continue to grow with this show. Our identity morphed so much, we found ourselves over the course of seasons. We found our identity as *Discovery*,

Season five putting that AR wall to good use.

Sonequa Martin-Green as Captain Burnham.

and then just kept growing. That's not something that you get all the time. You don't get that kind of transformation like we had with the show. Now, of course, looking at it as a complete thing, with these five seasons, I can say that I believe that one of our cornerstones is our transformation, our ability to transform and grow as a show, as a story, and then with each individual character as well.

How does it feel to have paved the way for a new generation of *Trek*?
Oh, my! It's surreal, it's surreal. I look around at the company of brilliant, beautiful people that I got to tell this story with and it feels just right. But then it also feels a bit like fantasy as well because we had no idea – we had *no* idea – what we were going to do. We knew the impact that *Trek* itself had already had, and we hoped that we would make an impact. But we didn't know what that impact was going to be. You can't predict impact, right? But we were able to learn over time how we *were* impacting people, and not just the people that watch the show, but also the platform itself. We were able to build the platform and be a foundation for the platform. And be that spark for the platform. Then we became the sort of mothership for the platform as well. We just didn't know, and so we were grateful along the way as we were seeing what we had created together having a snowball effect, seeing it branch off from us. It's an honour.

You feel a lot of things about it. We would talk about it a lot on set. I'm just so grateful that I was able to be there at the ground level of something so special, and grateful to see what we all were able to accomplish together and grateful for how it's touched people. Now the hope is that what has come from it, the expansion that's come from it, the hope is that the impact will continue, and for that I'm so grateful.

And there's a lot of things that you can do storytelling-wise. It gives our heroes chances to have more standalone adventures, go to a planet, do a thing *TOS*-style. So it was a lot of fun – very challenging, as these big shows always are, but in terms of telling the story, and then executing on the set and in post, it was a heck of a lot of fun.

You've also got new characters, as seen on our cover. Let's talk about Captain Rayner...
We'll learn that he's Kellerun, which is a minor planet mentioned in one of the other iterations, and we were looking for something that hadn't been explored a lot that would be really interesting. We learn more about his personal backstory and how that plays into who he is, why he is how he is. We learn about that as the season goes on, and the planet that he's from has a lot to do with that.

When we meet him he's quite antagonistic with our Captain Burnham. I think people will be somewhat surprised where that relationship →

> **“I’m sad that we’re ending, and that Picard has ended, but there’s lots more to come”**

ultimately goes. It’s a fun one. I’m hesitant to say too much, because I don’t wanna give any spoilers away. He’s an excellent antagonist with her and foil for her in the first episode, particularly.

And there are also the former couriers Moll and L’ak...

Moll we know is human, L’ak I will not reveal. We’re not gonna learn who he is until a little bit later in the season. But they are our bad guys for the season. Of course, we’re always looking for our villains to be well rounded, fully realised characters. We don’t want them to be one-note, moustache-twirling. When we were coming into the season, one of the things that we talked about was that we’ve had single villains before, but we’ve never had a duo villain. Alex and I were talking about them as kind of a Bonnie and Clyde duo, and so we wanted to come up with some characters who were strong in their own right but who also, as a team, will fight for one another and love one another deeply, and have each other’s backs.

And the force of their love for one another, and what drives them to do what they’re doing – which is something that we will learn in subsequent episodes – really makes them formidable foes for our heroes. We wanted them to be very strong antagonists, because the stronger they are, the more driven they are, the more our heroes have to push up against, and the harder it is for them to succeed.

I think we did that with Moll and L’ak, and as the episodes progress, and we start to learn more about Moll and L’ak, I think the audience will, in spite of themselves, start to fall in love with them in a way. Which is great – it’s great when you can really appreciate the villains. Even though you don’t want them to win, because you want our heroes to win! Some people want the villains to win. But they’re really great and the actors are fantastic. Elias [Toufexis, L’ak] and Eve [Harlow, Moll] are just wonderful.

Do you know what’s next for *Star Trek* in the 32nd century?

I don’t. I know they’re working on *Starfleet Academy* right now, but I’m not sure if that, or what else is to come, is in the 32nd century. I do know there’s more *Trek* to come. I’m sad that we’re ending, and that *Picard* has ended, but there’s lots more to come.

Would you come back to the franchise if asked?

Oh my god! 110%! I love *Star Trek*.

Book, Burnham and Culber get all shooty.

TEASING THE SEASON

Showrunner Michelle Paradise hints at what's to come!

"RED DIRECTIVE"
Launching the mission. The mission *is* a red directive. An exciting mission that launches us onto our season, and it's super-secret.

"UNDER THE TWIN MOONS"
A lovely Burnham and Saru episode.

"JINAAL"
Culber like you've never seen him before.

"FACE THE STRANGE"
Mind bending and exciting, and a heck of a lot of fun.

"MIRRORS"
[Long pause] I'm trying to think of something that won't be spoilery! Surprising encounters and surprising new information about our heroes.

"WHISTLESPEAK"
Oh, classic *TOS*-style adventure!

"ERIGAH"
Tense and unexpected.

"LABYRINTHS"
Oh, just an incredible gorgeous location, incredible scope and a singular journey for Burnham.

"LAGRANGE POINT"
Discovery in a location where you've never seen her before.

"LIFE, ITSELF"
Part of me wants to say the end of an era. But that just sounds so sad. I don't wanna say that! Hopefully it's all the things that *Discovery* has always been. Action, adventure, heart, family, love, sci-fi wonderfulness, beautifully acted, beautifully directed, production values, gorgeous VFX. It's everything we have always had in *Discovery* in one episode.

Callum Keith Rennie joins the cast as Rayner.

Non-binary Blu del Barrio plays non-binary Adira.

Mary Wiseman as Tilly: girls' night out. Well, in.

I love it. I grew up watching it. I love the previous iterations. I love the current iterations. I have *loved Discovery*. It's been, just across the board, some of the best human beings I've ever had the privilege of working with. Alex, everyone in Secret Hideout, our creative partners at CBS studios and Paramount+. Olatunde and all of our actors and our production team, our post team, all of our writers – we just have an amazing group of people.

There's just so much love. It has felt like a family. I think that comes through on screen and *Trek* itself is just so cool, like, I just love it. Just away from writing, I'm a science and genre geek, and I've loved getting to do it. I would come back in less than a heartbeat, half a heartbeat. Milli-heartbeat?

How do you think the show will be remembered in 10 or 20 years?

There's been so much about this particular iteration of *Star Trek* that has been truly groundbreaking. First of all, just relaunching the current versions of *Trek*. But just the diversity in front on the screen, behind the scenes. Sonequa in the captain's chair. Our non-binary and transgender characters. Just the diversity of our cast, the storylines we've gotten to tell dealing with the emotional situations that we've dealt with in a grounded way. Also it's the serialised storytelling, which, of course, is very different for a *Trek* TV series.

I don't know. I mean, I hope people will always look back and love it and love it as we have loved it, and go back and watch it again and again.

For me, I think if nothing else, if one person looks back and sees themselves on screen, sees themselves in a new way, feels that they can do something that they didn't think they could do before because our characters can do it, then that will mean the world.

Star Trek: Discovery is on Paramount+ from 4 April.

THE TITANS UNITE IN HOT COLLAB GODZILLA X KONG: THE NEW EMPIRE

WORDS: **NICK SETCHFIELD**

STRIKE
BACK

> “It’s an exciting time to be a filmmaker involved with these characters”

Rebecca Hall and Brian Tyree Henry return.

FROM THE DADDY OF URBAN devastation to defender of Earth, Godzilla’s rep has seen some serious reappraisal of late. Now director Adam Wingard has another role for the unstoppable kaiju: saviour of cinema.

“One of the things I’ve often thought about is the way the last film played during the pandemic,” says the Biblically bearded helmer, whose *Godzilla Vs Kong* showcased an epic smackdown between the titans in 2021.

“At the time theatres were at their lowest point. Nobody was going to see films – not even Christopher Nolan movies! – and theatres felt like they were dying. *Godzilla Vs Kong* came out and that was the first film where people started showing up again to the cinema.

“It was an event movie – and I can say that because I don’t take credit for it myself. I’m a guest of the franchise, to a certain degree. The truth is that King Kong and Godzilla are the biggest icons in film history, and it took both of them together in one movie to save cinema and to get people going back to the theatres again.”

KING OF THE SWINGERS

If *Godzilla Vs Kong* was a grudge match that ended in an uneasy truce then *Godzilla X Kong: The New Empire* is the tag team encore. As the achingly trendy “x” in the title tells us, this fifth entry in the Legendary Pictures MonsterVerse is nothing less than a cross-brand collaboration – only with rather more tail-swipes and flying masonry than the likes of Puma x Rihanna might muster...

“So, Kong, what do you think of the new look?”

Make no mistake: for all their scales and fur and city-smashing tendencies these are two bona fide A-listers, bringing the kind of big-screen game that only comes with decades of cinematic history (Kong first roared in 1933, Godzilla in 1954).

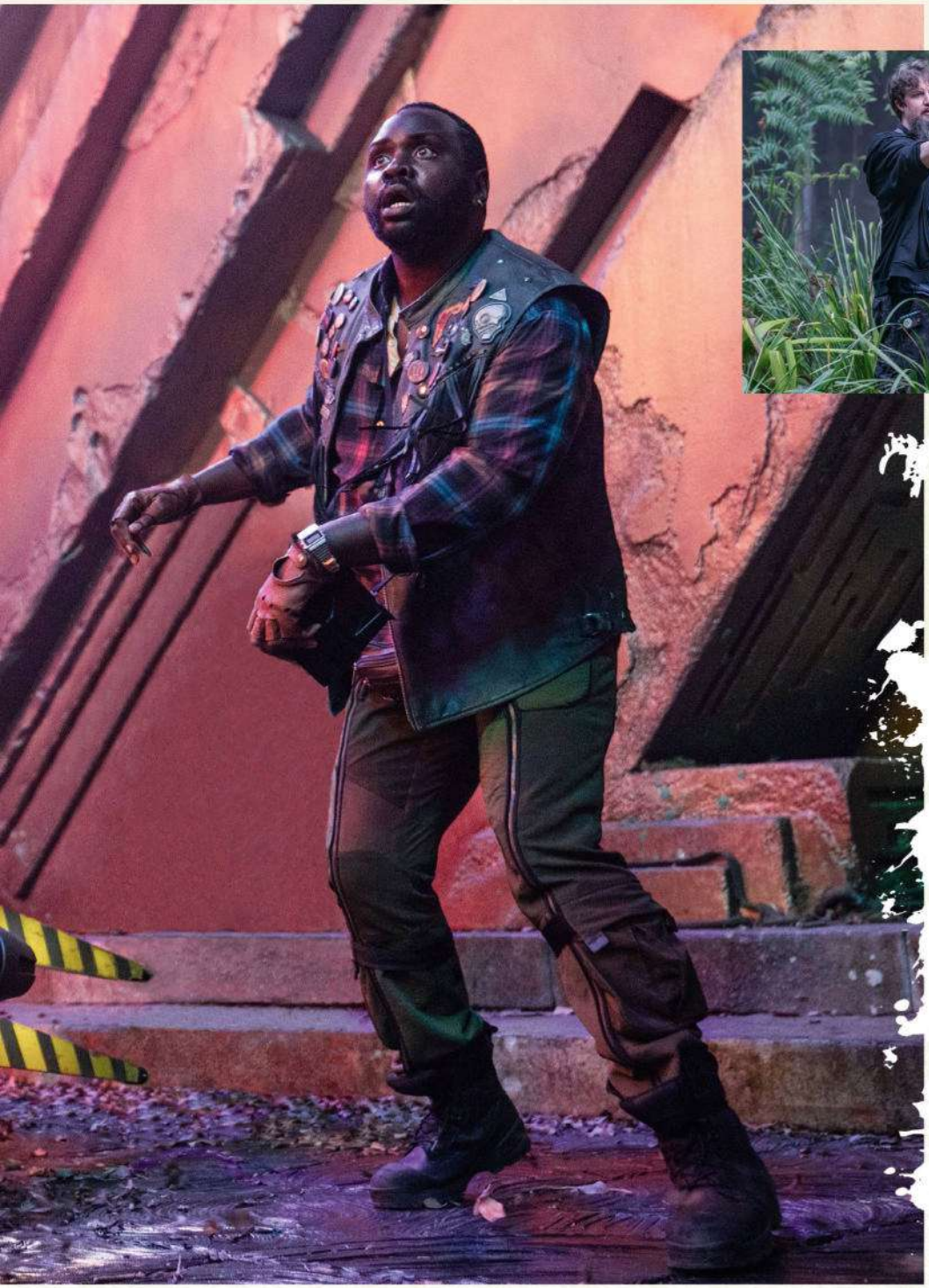
“There’s just something about the iconography of Kong that really relates to people,” Wingard tells *SFX* of his alpha ape. “He’s sort of a representation of our baser instincts and vulnerabilities as human beings. Kong really is the last masculine hero in movies. They just don’t make them like that any more.

“A big influence on me from that perspective is one of my favourite films, Michael Mann’s *Thief*. James Caan’s performance is one of the best performances I’ve ever seen. It’s the most masculine performance, I feel, in film history. He’s got his hairy chest, his hairy arms and all that, and he’s just such a badass. He doesn’t take shit from anybody. He’s good at what he does but at the end of the day what really defines him, what makes him feel truly masculine, is the fact that he’s also in touch with the sensitive side to him. He wants to have a kid, and it’s his relationship with the woman that you really remember.

“Kong is similar. He’s masculine because he’s a sensitive guy as well. In this film it’s all about his loneliness and him wanting to find others. We played with that in the last movie, his relationship with this little girl, Jia. What really, truly brings out what makes Kong such an interesting, very macho character is the sensitivity he can have as well. So there’s a lot of interesting things about him as a character that are fun to explore.”

The fact that this film arrives as Kong’s co-headliner celebrates his 70th is, Wingard admits, a happy accident. “I didn’t even think about that necessarily. Maybe it’s just serendipity. It’s always nice when there’s an anniversary that gives it that context.

“Maybe that weird anniversary is one of those subconscious things about why there’s such an interest in Godzilla. It’s sort of a celebration right now, culturally, that he’s been around as long as he has and he’s this huge icon. It’s not just my film. You’ve got *Godzilla Minus One*, which is a mega-hit in Japan, one of the biggest of all time, and you have the *Monarch* TV show, which is a huge hit for



Director Adam Wingard (left) points the way.

"Is it too much? I think it might be too much."

Apple. There's just so much Godzilla synergy going on right now. It's an exciting time to be a filmmaker involved with these characters."

So just what threat is formidable enough to find Kong high-fiving his former adversary? Enter the Skar King, a rival ape monarch ruling from a creepy, skull-littered throne room in the Hollow Earth, the subterranean realm first explored in *Godzilla Vs Kong*. This primate tyrant is determined that his world should be the only one, which is unfortunate news for us surface-dwelling types...

"I always saw him as being the anti-Kong character," Wingard says of the film's antagonist. "Physically he's formidable because →

THE KONG WHISPERER

REBECCA HALL
is Dr Ilene Andrews

Why do you think Kong and Godzilla endure as movie icons?
Godzilla is the embodiment of the existential nuclear threat, and the capacity for annihilation. These are very real concerns, very real fears, certainly now there's the issue of climate. These are all real things that can be aired and vented. These fears that all of those themes throw up can be exorcised in some way through the bodies of these gigantic monsters, who are not real, and who don't actually pose a threat to mankind, but we can go and spend a couple of hours thinking about the worst possible version of our fears. I think there's an enduring interest in them because they are these blank canvases that we can map all this stuff onto.

You filmed in a real rainforest for this. How was that experience?
The rainforest was crazy. It looked so much like where we'd been in the studio – we were in the studio first and we had to match the studio to the actual location. We'd gotten so used to the jungle environment inside the studio we'd forgotten that actually when we went to the real jungle, there would be things like large bugs and unpleasant humid conditions. And there would have to be a guy there who would check the brush before we walked through in case there were any murderous snakes!

I saw cassowaries, which I couldn't look in the eye because they were in the season when they had just had babies, so if you happen to come across the mother and you look her in the eye she will attack you, and it's pretty scary. They attack with claws, like velociraptors, the most dinosaur-looking things I've seen in my life.

What's it like working with Adam Wingard again?
We know what worked about the first one, we know how to make it that much better. We have a laugh. We take what we have to take seriously but we also know what the material is, and we have fun when we make these films. I think that shows, and I think that is important. I don't say that trivially. It's a good thing that we have fun!

What's the trick to acting against nothing?
My trick is absolutely no shame! No embarrassment, no self-consciousness, just fully go for it. Be prepared to look like a fool.

he's more agile than Kong, but what makes him such an interesting villain is that for the first time in the realm of monster villains he isn't going off some sort of base instinct. Ghidorah [seen in 2019's *Godzilla: King Of The Monsters*] was a world-ending threat, but Ghidorah is also a creature going on instinct. There's still an animal drive to it.

"The Skar King is a fully conscious, human-adjacent being. The apes have a lot more of our attributes. They can be empathetic, they can be angry, and they have thoughts and feelings. In this case the Skar King is motivated by power and control in the same way that dictators are. In a way he's like this super-dictator whose motivations are greedy and selfish and sinister. There's a consciousness to his madness that could mean he's much harder to stop."

ICONS REMIXED

The two titans return to the screen with notable tweaks to their iconography. Wingard is tight-lipped on the whys and hows, but Kong now rocks a high-tech gauntlet while a shade of shocking pink illuminates Godzilla's dorsal plates in place of traditional atomic blue.

"It was important to me that if we were going to change up Godzilla's look then it was motivated by story," the director tells *SFX*. "When I did *GVK* I purposefully didn't change Godzilla's design from *King Of Monsters* because I wanted to make sure that if we're doing a 'vs' film, you felt like this was a legitimate 'vs' movie.

"It wasn't like when they did *King Kong Vs Godzilla* back in the day, where it was, 'Okay, here's Godzilla, but this version of Kong is the first non-stop-motion version – it's a guy in a suit.' So it felt like a different character to the Kong that you knew in the original movie.

"So for [*Godzilla Vs Kong*] it was very important that we keep a consistency with the characters. But going into this one I knew, okay, I want to mix it up. I want to do my version of Godzilla, and I wanted to make sure that there was a real legitimate reason in the film for it. In a lot of ways Godzilla's evolved form in this movie is his story. His main storyline is showing how he can change his appearance."

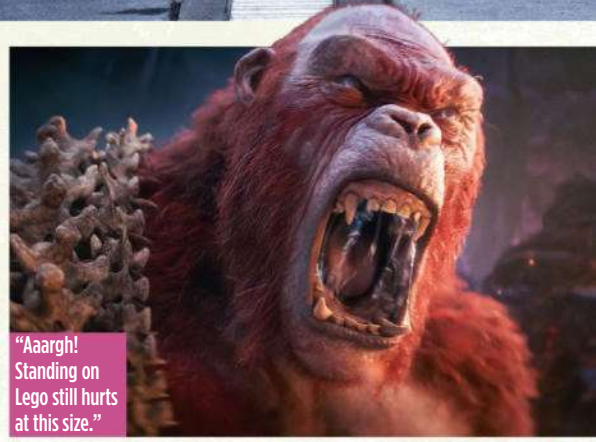
Being in the pink finds the lizard king thoroughly on trend with Hollywood, of course. "It's kind of funny," smiles Wingard. "It wasn't by design. We didn't know that *Barbie* would be a thing and *Oppenheimer* would be the second biggest movie of the year and that there would be this whole Barbenheimer meme and that somehow my pink Godzilla would be the physical embodiment of Barbenheimer! I guess it shows that we're in sync, culturally, in some sort of way that could never have been predicted!"

It's not all rampaging behemoths and oversized simians. Some members of the cast can actually fit in a car. Rebecca Hall returns as Monarch boffin Ilene Andrews alongside Brian Tyree Henry as conspiracy theorist Bernie Hayes and Kaylee Hottle as Jia, the deaf Skull Islander who shares an emotional bond with Kong. Dan Stevens also enlists in the MonsterVerse as Trapper, a veterinarian specialising in kaiju. But for all their human component these films are primarily exercises in spectacle, surely, built to wow audiences? Wingard disagrees.

"For me my main drive is always to approach this as a character study. We all know that CGI can create these awe-inspiring, incredible moments of monsters and larger than life

Trapper, Dr Ilene Andrews and Jia are ready to rock.

> "Some people will just write it off as a big, dumb, crazy monster thrill ride, and that's fine"



"Aaargh! Standing on Lego still hurts at this size."

Jia (Kaylee Hottle) tries to make friends with Kong.

"KONG NEEDS HER"

KAYLEE HOTTLE is Jia

How has Jia grown as a character?
Jia had a lot of stuff taken away from her, her family, her identity, her culture. So she's on this journey to understand who she is. Later she grows, and she's able to find out who she is as a person.

Why do you think Kong cares so deeply about Jia?
Jia is not trying to research him, she's trying to have that real connection with Kong, what he needs, and he needs Jia. He needs her to have that connection, because she listens to him, and she's able to express herself to him and vice versa. He needs someone to listen to and I feel Jia is that person. That's what makes their connection so strong.

What was it like being directed by Adam Wingard?
I didn't have any challenges working alongside Adam as a deaf actress. He was so informative. He showed me camera angles. It was very nice of him to be so open and cool to me. That's what made the whole process easier. He wanted to make sure that I saw the frame, so that my sign language was completely seen in the movie.

"Just try to remember where we're parked."

things. To a certain degree bringing the monsters to life from a visual standpoint isn't as important to me any more, because that's a given. You've seen them brought to life. You've seen them do things. What we need to see now is the way that they think and feel. That's why I wanted to do a movie that was really told from their perspective primarily, one that allows you to empathise with them and that treats them like characters.

"Obviously Godzilla and Kong are very different characters. Godzilla doesn't let you in as much. You always have to treat him with a bit more reverence, just because that's who Godzilla is. His first name is God! But with Kong there's more of an easy access point, emotionally and empathetically with the character."

It's that emotional connection that Wingard is determined to hold onto, in a modern movie landscape that sometimes feels like an ever-escalating arms race of the dreamable.

"In a world of anything's possible, you can type words into your computer now and the AI will churn up a bunch of images that are completely mindblowing for you to see. Well, what is it that the AI can't do? I'm sure it could show you what it looks like if Godzilla and Kong are having a birthday party in the tropics, complete with 300ft tall birthday cakes. You can see anything, but you can't create things that make you feel something. That's where my interest lies. I want to do a 300ft-scale character study."

For Wingard "this is our *Fast & Furious 5* moment, where the series is coming into its own of being able to say definitively 'This is what the MonsterVerse is.'" But it's also a tale that packs an extra resonance, he argues, echoing both mythologically and in the real world, too.

"I'm looking forward to seeing people's takes on what they pull from, especially the Skar King element, because I think he's the real linchpin. Some people will just write it off as a big, dumb, crazy monster thrill ride, and that's totally fine and valid," he acknowledges. "I encourage people to just enjoy it on the face value of pure entertainment, because to a certain degree that's really the main point, you know?

"But you can't really succeed in doing a movie that's a fun thrill ride if it doesn't have any substance to it, because it's just an empty ride. Some movies can lead with that substance, in other ones it's subtext. The subtext is there, but really at the end of the day I just want people to have a good time."

Godzilla X Kong: The New Empire is in cinemas from 29 March.

WELCOME HOME

THE CREATIVE MINDS BEHIND THE LIVE-ACTION ADAPTATION OF THE *FALLOUT* GAME SERIES EXPLAIN THEIR ORIGINAL TAKE ON BETHESDA'S POST-APOCALYPTIC WORLD

WORDS: **TARA BENNETT**

WHETHER YOU'RE A GAMER OR not, you've likely seen or heard of the *Fallout* videogame series. For the record, it's the one featuring that super smiley blond kid mascot in the blue and yellow jumpsuit waving at you at every videogame retailer.

The series has been around for three decades now, as the original game, created by Tim Cain, was released way back in 1997. His creation was a futuristic, post-apocalyptic RPG for personal computers. But by 2008, under new developers Bethesda Softworks and game director Todd Howard, the series evolved into an expansive, open-world, multi-platform experience in *Fallout 3*.

Featuring 3D graphics and first-person combat gameplay, the third chapter continued the mythology 200 years after the inciting nuclear conflict that wiped out a familiar, but kitschy, Cold War-era version of the United States. In this world, humans who could pay up survived by living in a protected underground Vault Network, with the intention to eventually repopulate the world. The unlucky suckers who couldn't spent two centuries duking it out topside, battling starvation, dehydration, radiation and mutations... and eventually you, the player.

The *Fallout* universe features four main games and seven spin-off titles, which together have sold more than 55 million units. But strangely, it's taken until now for a big-budget, live-action adaptation to see the light. The eight-episode TV series arrives via Prime Video and Kilter Films, with Howard and Bethesda's blessing and involvement.

Series executive producer, and director of three episodes, Jonathan Nolan (*Westworld*), admits to *SFX* that he fell prey to *Fallout 3* not long after it was released. He was hooked and played it to completion. "Back in the day, I kind of felt like Todd Howard owed me something for that," Nolan jokes about his time sink of choice in the late '00s.

Aside from loving the game, Nolan says the world stuck with him too. "I remember the shock of realising just how intense and violent →

the game was. It's just a bizarre, almost cutesy/weird satire with overwhelming scope, which is something [Kilter Films] is drawn to."

In 2019, Nolan met with Howard over lunch to discuss a live-action adaptation. The possibility of a film version had been bandied about with other companies since 2000, but at their meeting the pair decided a streaming series would be the better path. Nolan then enlisted screenwriter Geneva Robertson-Dworet (*Captain Marvel*), who brought on TV comedy writer Graham Wagner (*Portlandia*) to develop the world into a series.

Having looked for a project to make with Nolan for years, and separately wanting to write with Wagner, Robertson-Dworet says *Fallout* was the surprise "perfect" storm for the trio. "I knew the games were a blend of comedy, which is [Graham's] forte, and the kind of action/sci-fi that I had been working in for so long," she says.

Nolan agreed. "For me, *Fallout* had all these different things that I found appealing, the speculative and the political satire of it. But it also had a sense of humour to it, and that was something that we hadn't really played with before. It was something I was excited about and very nervous about because the tone of these things is very specific. So the combination of their two sensibilities, along with my desire here to really do right by the ambition and scope of the games, felt like the dream team."

> **"If we adapted one specific game, it would not have actually been truthful"**

At the time, *Westworld* was still on Nolan and his producing partner Lisa Joy's plate, so they made the decision to let Robertson-Dworet and Wagner develop and eventually showrun the series, leaving Nolan to engage with the project in a producer/directorial role.

Where do you start with such a massive canvas of potential stories to tell? From the top, Robertson-Dworet says they were given only one ask by Todd Howard: to make sure the series storyline didn't contradict any of the major possible endings of the games, which they respected. So they set their story within the same timeline, with it taking place after *Fallout 4*.

"We felt like that would be the best thing to honour the gamer's experiences, and the most truthful," she explains. "If we adapted one specific game, it would not have actually been truthful because it's an open world game and everyone's experience is different. So had we taken any of the setups of any of the games and just done it 'straightforwardly', a lot of gamers would be like, 'That's not the order that I played it in.'"

Instead, as a callout to the OG players, they gently weaved in characters, settings or mission goals similar to those from the various games. For example, the Lone Wanderer's quest in *Fallout 3* is similar to that of the main character in this series. And the setting of post-apocalyptic Los Angeles harkens back to where the original *Fallout* game unfolds.

All of it got the approval of Howard. "Todd is one of the most laid-back executives ever," Wagner chuckles. "For the amount that he oversees, he's a very chill guy. He read the pilot and was like, 'You know, we never really talked about the incest factor. That's a great idea.'"

COWBOY STYLE

The new is represented by the characters, the most important being the ones who drive the story engine: Vault Dweller Lucy (Ella Purnell), Brotherhood of Steel squire Maximus (Aaron Moten) and mutated bounty hunter the Ghoul (Walton Goggins).

As fans of Sergio Leone's 1966 classic *The Good, The Bad And The Ugly*, Robertson-Dworet and Wagner realised they shared a personal head canon that the film's trio of "Blondie" (Clint Eastwood), Tuco (Eli Wallach) and "Angel Eyes" (Lee Van Cleef) can be seen as the same cowboy, just represented at different stages in their life. It's a concept they wanted to transfer and explore with their *Fallout* trio.

"We looked at Lucy, Maximus and the Ghoul as those three people who spend different amounts of time on the Wasteland, being metaphorically and literally irradiated with that time and that exposure, and how it's changed them," Wagner explains.

Each comes into the story with vastly different histories which together epitomise the "haves and have-nots" class system core to the game's mythology. Lucy is meant to honour the game's tendency to follow a Vault Dweller leaving their vault, as she does in episode one.

A cheery soul on a mission to find her missing Vault 33 Mayor/father (Kyle MacLachlan), Lucy has, Wagner says, been raised her whole life in a safe "bubble", with no context for what's outside. Inspired by recent pandemic behaviours, Lucy represents the clueless, privileged class approach to existence.

"It's really easy to be like, 'I'm a good person!' when nothing bad really happens," he says of her naïve worldview. "Like, we're patting ourselves on the back for staying inside during Covid."

"Or those of us who had the privilege of having someone get our groceries for us, which is actually pretty gross. In many ways, they're taking the risk for us, so they're the surface dwellers," Robertson-Dworet observes, connecting the real world to the world of →

Walton Goggins plays the irradiated Ghoul.

Lucy (Ella Purnell) settles into the main quest.

The Brotherhood of Steel worship tech.

Lucy does the equivalent of the tutorial level.

Get a hold of that Power Armour, quickly!

Fallout. "It was a moment of literalising the 'haves and have-nots', and that's exactly what the game does so beautifully with the idea of the Vault Dwellers.

"It's Lucy's luck that she gets to be a good person, and the idea that morality is a privilege was definitely one to play with and explore as she goes to the surface," she continues. "But how long will she hang on to those ideals, or how fast will she be changed?"

"And yet, the strange thing about Lucy is that we kind of have it both ways," Wagner adds. "We're both rooting for her to hang onto her morality, but also understand that her morality came to her from silly circumstances."

GHOUL POWER

Maximus brings to life the game's Brotherhood of Steel faction, an odd collection of survivors obsessed with confiscating pre-War technology, and then going into battle with their finds – such as refurbished T-60 power armour suits. In the series, Max is a 20-something squire risking his life to assist a lunkheaded Lord – which makes him question his loyalty to someone he should, but doesn't, respect.

Then there's the Ghoul, the epitome of a Wastelander who's seen it all and survived it all. Both writers confirm that Goggins was their first choice, from character creation, to play the relentless bounty hunter.

"He was always the Ghoul. Then the question became, 'How the heck do you do that?'" Wagner says of the character, who would need to look mutated most of the time.

"We were having conversations with various VFX vendors about how to do it. But we ended up doing it the old-fashioned way, which was five and a half hours every day in the make-up chair. He heroically sat in that chair watching [Akira] Kurosawa and [Sergio] Leone movies every morning with the great [make-up artist] Jake Garber." Through Maximus and the Ghoul, Lucy will get a ground-level education about reality, and together they'll play out the show's theme of searching for family. "That may take very different forms because of the circumstances that each of them are in, or the faction that each of them are part of," Robertson-Dworet explains. "But that is fundamentally, to us, what these three characters are searching for. I feel like that's the most primitive possible yearning that we all have."

"*Fallout*, in a lot of ways, is about who gets to rebuild the world, what faction and what society gets to rebuild society, because then it'll be their society," Wagner muses. "We think that the theme of family is pretty organic to that because the most fundamental building block of society is family. We're hoping that it feels like those themes are organic to the story we're telling."

It was left to Nolan to make those personal stories land and not get lost in this distinctive, epic-scale world – and realise it with visuals that would match, if not better, what the games introduced. "To bring that feeling and sensibility to the audience, where they can't pick up a controller and turn the camera, is a really daunting challenge," Nolan admits. "But we had the great fortune of partnering with Amazon Studios, who are nothing if not ambitious. Really, that's our vision. We'll call this sort of a maximalist vision."

Nolan used a mixture of digital with a lot of practical photography, captured in Utah and locations in Elizabeth Bay, Namibia. "We

Jonathan Nolan directed three of the episodes.

Is this Dogmeat? No, but a similar companion.

Make sure you check the graves for hidden stuff...

Lifts are a handy way to disguise level loading.

Exec producer Jonathan Nolan with Ella Purnell.

decided we're gonna shoot some of these things on the Volume," he says, referring to the Industrial Light & Magic technology featured in series like *The Mandalorian* as a replacement for greenscreen.

"But we're also gonna go to practical locations first to get as much photographic material as possible. Most of what's in the show is practical. When you have an incredibly talented visual effects team, they can go so much further when you give them a good chunk of reality."

Wagner believes audiences will be wowed by the results. "Jonah's [Jonathan's] eye on making things feel tangible and the texture of everything... we had more conversations about patina than I ever had in my life," he laughs. "But it works because it keeps it from being a greenscreen, CG soup where you're like, 'Why didn't you just go all the way and make this a cartoon?' I feel like watching this show, the reasons are there. You're actually watching a live-action show with Jonah grounding it that way, visually."

Wagner says the hope is that the series continues for further seasons. "There's piles and piles of stuff we want to do," he teases. "We wanted to slow our roll and not do it all in eight episodes, because we're talking about thousands of hours of gameplay."

Fallout is on Prime Video from 12 April.

STOCK ELEMENTS: ISTOCK/GETTY

UTOPIA'S CHILD

Ella Purnell is a naive Vault dweller venturing Topside to save her father

Your voice work as Jinx for the *Arcane* series was well received. Did that make you choosier about considering other videogame adaptations?

Not really. I guess it opened up my eyes to that world. I'm not really a gamer. I don't have a ton of experience in that field. But just seeing the passion that videogame fans have... The thing about videogame adaptions is there's so much lore and there's so much to sink your teeth into. I really love doing that, being able to play within the parameters that have already been set with the world that exists.

Lucy's an original character. How was the role pitched to you?

I first met with Jonathan Nolan and Geneva and Graham, the writers. They wanted to talk to me before they sent me the script to introduce me to Lucy and explain the world and the tone of *Fallout*. They immediately got my attention because they described her as someone who could star in a toothpaste commercial, but also was capable of killing you. I just thought that was really interesting.

Since you're not a gamer, did wearing the iconic Vault suit or the Pip-Boy have much impact on you?

I did play *Fallout 4* a little bit to research the games. I just watched people play it, because I was not that good! But the weight of the responsibility on what I was doing, the gravitas of that, was not lost on me for even a second. Like, the first time I saw a Nuka-Cola bottle was the coolest thing ever. I remember putting on the Vault suit for the first time and it was humbling.

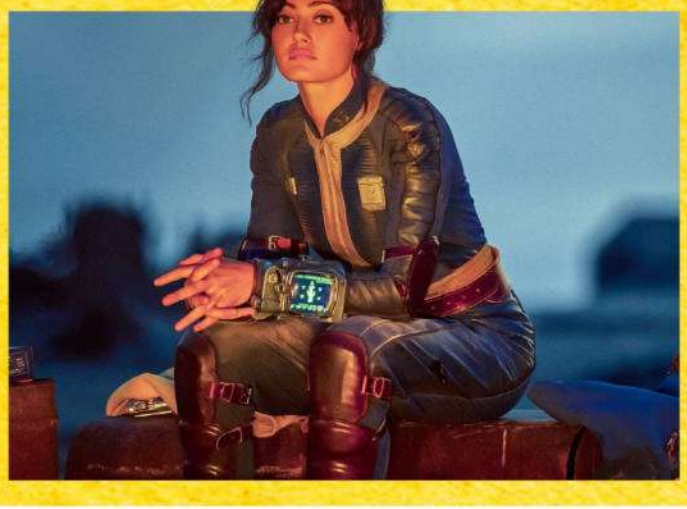
How would you describe Lucy when we first meet her?

She's a Vault Dweller. She's lived her entire life underground. She, obviously, is very naive. At her core, she is good. All she's ever known is this community of people who think exactly the same way as her, who were all raised the same. What was interesting for me is that she's funny. Her humour comes from her innocence, right? She's got that all-American, can-do attitude. From that comes strength.

On her journey, Lucy connects with Maximus, the squire and the Ghoul. How do they change her?

I love how they use these three archetypes as a way to explore the theme of morality in the show. They balance each other out, the three of them. They all have something the other doesn't have. They all have different backgrounds and have come to adapt to survive in completely different ways.

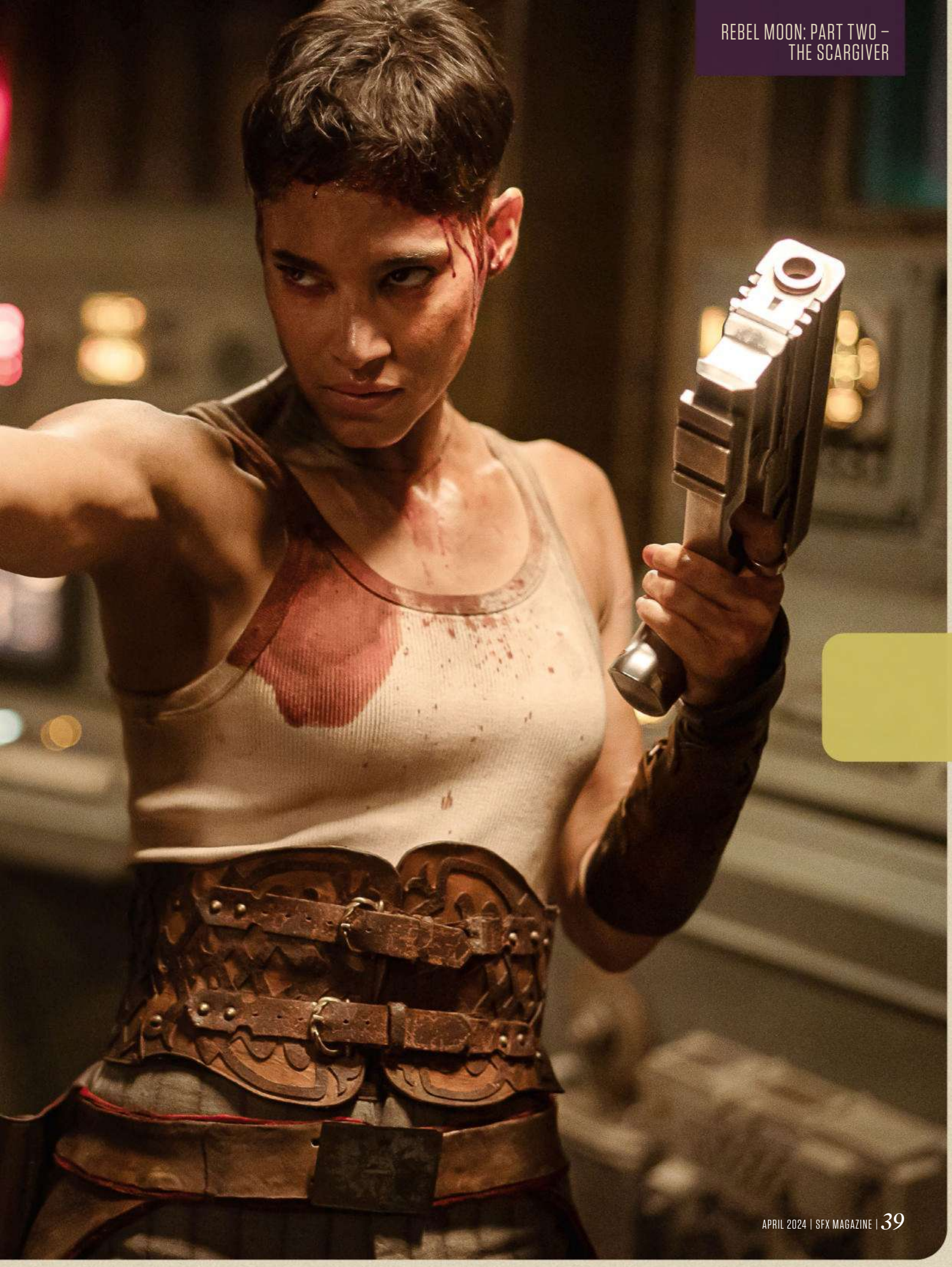
Lucy is faced with a choice when she's presented with these two characters who symbolise these two different ways of being. She has to decide who she wants to be. Every character that she meets in the season will shape her, just like her environment is going to shape her. Who she is at the end of the season is very different from the Lucy in episode one.



THE IMPERIUM STRIKES BACK

AS ZACK SNYDER RETURNS TO HIS REBEL MOON UNIVERSE, THE WRITER/DIRECTOR TEASES THE SCARGIVER, TALKS EXTENDED CUTS, AND ADMITS HE'S "NOT REALLY A FOCUS GROUP FILMMAKER"

WORDS: **RICHARD EDWARDS**



A LONG TIME AGO – 1980 to be precise – a generation of cinemagoers walked out of *The Empire Strikes Back* knowing they'd have to wait years to learn the truth about Luke Skywalker and his absent dad.

Fast-forward to our current era of instant gratification, however, and space opera cliffhangers are being resolved in a matter of parsecs. And so *Rebel Moon: Part Two – The Scargiver*, the second half of Zack Snyder's interstellar riff on *The Seven Samurai*, lands on Netflix mere months after its predecessor *A Child Of Fire* made its heavily publicised debut in December.

"My initial idea was to actually have them come out closer together, closer than Netflix did," the writer/director tells *SFX*. "I wanted them out, like, a month apart, because I just felt like the idea was to strike while the iron is still hot, when more people remember [the first film], you know?"

"It's really two parts of the same story we're telling in these two movies," adds Deborah Snyder, who's been producing husband Zack's movies since 2006's *300*. "It wasn't realistic to put a four-hour movie on [Netflix], but to really give these characters their due, to tell the story, to have the action and have it be compelling, we needed that time. They're not sequels, they're parts, and that's intentional. They're meant to work together."

SCAR TACTICS

We're assuming you haven't forgotten *Rebel Moon* in those few short months, but here's a quick recap. Having tackled Spartan armies (*300*), comic book heroes (*Watchmen*, *Man Of Steel*, *Justice League*) and zombies (*Dawn Of The Dead*, *Army Of The Dead*), Snyder blasts into outer space in the nascent Netflix franchise. The long-gestating project – Snyder first discussed the idea with co-writer Kurt Johnstad in the late '90s – was unsuccessfully pitched as a potential *Star Wars* movie before George Lucas sold his empire to Disney.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, *Rebel Moon* shares plenty of DNA – if not midi-chlorians – with a certain galaxy far, far away. For the dreaded Emperor Palpatine and Galactic Empire, substitute regent Balisarius (*Hawkeye*'s Fra Fee) and the Motherworld, a totalitarian organisation with a penchant for precision-cut military tailoring.

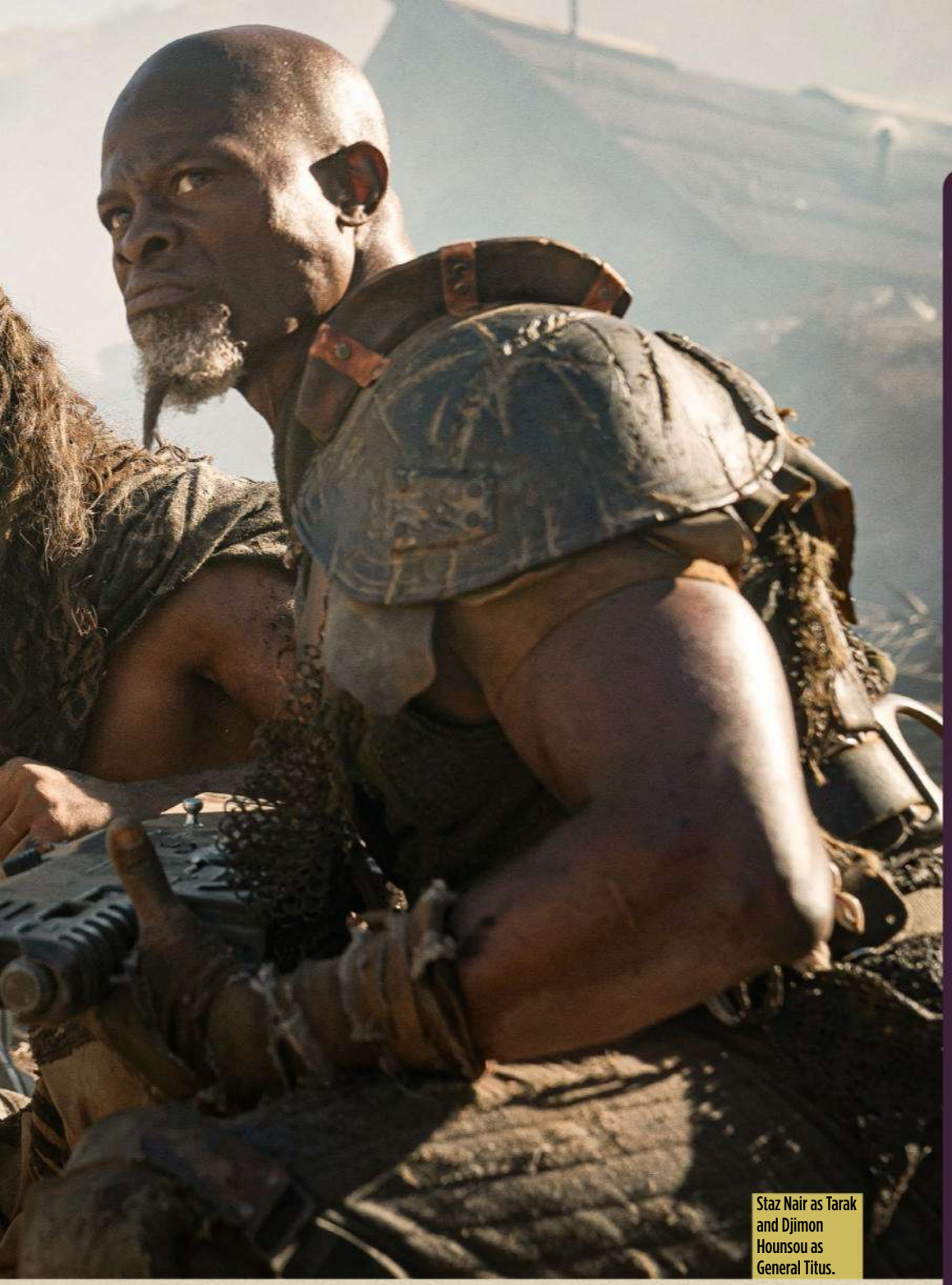
It's a universe of bizarre aliens, spectacular planetscapes and an energy sword or two, where ordinary people rally against fascistic oppressors. The first film even featured a very Lando-ish betrayal. But to dismiss *Rebel Moon* as *Star Wars* 2.0 would be unfair. It's darker (yes, even compared to *The Empire Strikes Back*) and considerably more violent, set in a universe where the agents of the Motherworld use macabre walking cages known as paralysers to entrap their enemies, before firing a bolt into the base of their brains. "We call them the *Beetlejuice* chairs!" Zack explains. *A Child Of Fire* was also unmistakably a Zack Snyder movie – beautiful to look at, with enough slow-motion action to put a major sporting event to shame.

And the saga's plot owes as much to *The Seven Samurai* and *The Magnificent Seven* as it does any existing *Star Wars* release. The story sees Kora (Sofia Boutella) recruiting a ragtag assortment of warriors to protect peaceful

"Movie one is about collecting the team, and movie two is about the war and why we fight"

Ed Skrein as Atticus Noble (centre).

Soma Mitra as Queen of Samandrai.



Staz Nair as Tarak and Djimon Hounsou as General Titus.

farmers on the moon of Veldt from the Imperium (the Motherworld's ruling body), after a particularly sadistic officer demands they hand over their next harvest. With her gang of wannabe avengers assembled and ready to go by the first film's end credits, *The Scargiver* will see these underdogs taking the fight back to these space-faring bullies.

"If these two stories together were like a big, giant, four- or five-act opera, you've probably seen two of the acts," explains Zack. "We're about halfway through. Movie one is about collecting the team, and movie two is about the war and why we fight. It takes place more on Veldt because that's where the fight is."

"When you're establishing a new IP, with new characters and locations, movie one always has a lot of heavy lifting to do," chips in Deborah. "But when you watch movie two, you get backstory. We find out how our people became the people that they are, you get to know them. And then when you get to the war, this movie is a *lot* more action-packed."

Boutella – the *Kingsman: The Secret Service* and *Star Trek Beyond* star whose dance background has helped her become one of Hollywood's finest exponents of gravity-defying fight sequences – delivers her fair share of those action beats. Kora is also the inspiration for both movies' subtitles: →

JIMMY JIMMY

The robot who sounds like Sir Anthony Hopkins has a big role to play in *The Scargiver*

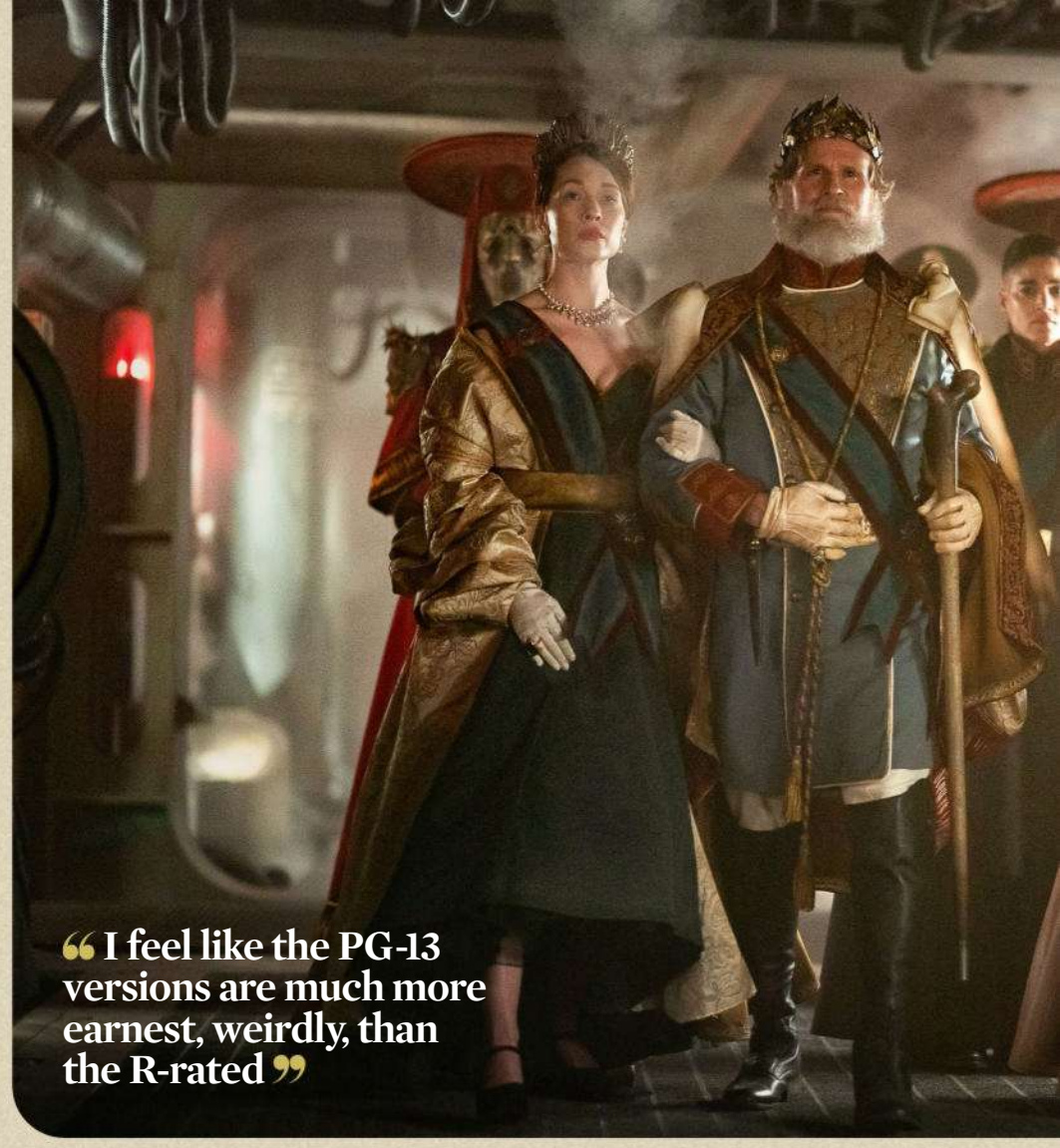
There's no shortage of robots in sci-fi, but there aren't too many who speak with the received pronunciation of a bona fide knight of the realm. Voiced by Sir Anthony Hopkins, Jimmy (JC-1435 to his mum and dad) was programmed to protect the Motherworld's royal family, but after they were assassinated, he opted for a life of pacifism – until Imperium soldiers assaulted a young woman on Veldt, and he was forced to take lethal action.

"Jimmy's been created to see the world through the eyes of a protector of this princess who was supposed to be a saviour, but is now dead," explains Zack Snyder. "If she was like a Messiah and the Messiah dies, that's a tough nut for you. I think it's fun to explore those kinds of themes and concepts through a robot, because it allows you to distil it down to its most pure form. He's a singular creature and now he's been forced to contemplate his existence."

Having played a prominent role in the first act of *A Child Of Fire*, Jimmy was absent until the end of the movie, where he was sighted wearing a crown of antlers. His story, says Snyder, isn't over.

"You'll see quite a bit more of Jimmy in the director's cut, where he's communing with nature and musing about his existence. Then in movie two he has a choice to make. He has to pick a side, basically. I mean, if you really examine what he's done to be in the position he's in, he's gone down a road that's going to be hard for him to come back from – it's whether or not he wants to participate directly in the fight.

"There's also some fun interaction between him and Kora. They're both weapons, and they're good foils for each other."



> **“I feel like the PG-13 versions are much more earnest, weirdly, than the R-rated”**

A Child Of Fire refers to her origins as an orphan taken in by Balisarius; *The Scargiver*, meanwhile, is the nickname she was given in her days as a feared operative of the Imperium. More importantly, she was bodyguard to Issa, a princess of the Motherworld prophesied to be the “Lifegiver” of legend, and whose assassination was a catalyst in Balisarius’s rise to power. After many years in hiding, Kora’s been doing what she can to stay off her former employers’ radar – though now she’s well and truly back in their crosshairs.

“Kora’s our window into this world, for sure,” says Zack. “She tells us about herself and then others tell her who they are, so we learn both about her and the warriors she’s gathered. They’re all on some sort of redemption track, so they need each other and the coming conflict to find catharsis. By the end of the movie Kora knows the way forward for herself. She’s clear in her mission forward after this.”

“We will also see more of all our characters’ [origins],” adds Deborah, “We saw where they’ve ended up, but how did they get there? That’s what we find out in this movie.”

Before the heroes have any chance of finding that aforementioned redemption, they’ll have to face off against a pair of rather hissable villains. Zack confirms we’ll learn more about how Balisarius (a minor presence in the first movie) became regent of the Motherworld, but we suspect rather more eyes will be on the return of Admiral Atticus Noble (Ed Skrein).

This tech-augmented military scumbag has already displayed a predilection for monologuing like *Inglourious Basterds*’ Hans Landa. Having been killed by Kora – and subsequently resurrected – he’s surely going to be out for revenge.

“I think death has changed him,” Zack reveals. “Death has kind of purified him, and he’s a little bit smarter, a little bit more in command of his faculties. He has a directive [from Belisarius] now, and he knows what he has to do.”

Zack Snyder has long been one of the more divisive filmmakers in Hollywood. For all his vast legions of fans – Warner Bros’ decision to release the “Snyder Cut” of *Justice League* was the result of a passionate internet campaign – he’s had just as many detractors. Reviewers have been particularly hard on *A Child Of Fire*, with the movie scoring just 22% from critics (at time of writing) on aggregator site Rotten Tomatoes. (For the record, the audience score is much higher, at 58%.)

You get the feeling, however, that it would take more than the combined might of Planet Earth’s critics to change the director’s approach. Indeed, when we ask if he’s used Netflix’s extensive viewer data to inform his artistic decisions on *The Scargiver*, he says his method remains old school.

THE ROOT OF SEVEN

Rebel Moon isn’t the first space opera inspired by *The Magnificent Seven*

It’s well known that the success of the original *Star Wars* prompted Hollywood to look to the skies, spawning a glut of space operas of varying quality. In the midst of all the *Flash Gordon*s, *Battlestar Galactica*s and *Black Hole*s came *Battle Beyond The Stars* (1980), a movie whose title was apparently the result of looking up “Star” and “Wars” in a thesaurus. *Space Fight*, anyone? *A Skirmish In The Cosmos*?

It’s an interstellar western in which young farmer Shad (played by John-Boy Walton himself, Richard Thomas) recruits a bunch of anti-heroes to protect his world from a megalomaniac warlord. Produced by B-movie maestro Roger Corman, the film’s budget was significantly lower than many of the other movies slipstreaming in George Lucas’s wake – some of the alien costumes look extremely bargain basement – but this take on that familiar *The Seven Samurai/The Magnificent Seven* blueprint still punched above its weight. It made respectable money at the box office, and boasted an impressive array of talent on both sides of the camera.

On screen, *Man From UNCLE* star Robert Vaughn more or less reprised his *Magnificent Seven* role as assassin Gelt, while a pre-*A-Team* George Peppard showed up as a very literal space cowboy. Future *Aliens* star Bill Paxton worked as a carpenter, Jimmy Murakami (who’d go on to work on festive classic *The Snowman*) called the shots, and *The Wrath Of Khan/Aliens* composer James Horner wrote the score.

Then there’s the matter of some guy called James Cameron, who looked after a lot of the (pretty decent) visual effects. We’ll watch his career with great interest...

WARNER/ORION/KOBAL/SHUTTERSTOCK

The Queen and King, Kora and Princess Issa give it all that.

LUNAR TUNES

Other famous moons in sci-fi

ENDOR
STAR WARS
Has same name as its planet. Confusing.

PRAXIS
STAR TREK VI: THE UNDISCOVERED COUNTRY
Explodes. Bad news for the Klingon Empire.

PANDORA
AVATAR
James Cameron's home for last decade and a half.

EUROPA
2010
Real moon of Jupiter. Attempt no landing there.

BUTTON MOON
BUTTON MOON
Haberdasher's dream. Theme song by Peter Davison.

"How people have consumed the product, if you want to put it that way, really hasn't changed the way I make movies and it never really has," he admits. "I'm not really a focus group filmmaker. And by the way, if that's how you want to make a movie, that's 100% fine with me. It's just not the way I do it."

Of course, the future of this expensive new franchise is likely to depend more on viewers' eyeballs – and those infamous Netflix algorithms – than the opinions of entertainment journalists, and in that regard *Rebel Moon* seems to be doing okay. *A Child Of Fire* bagged well over 60 million views worldwide during its first 10 days on release, and – as Deborah puts it – "That's big box office! Not many movies get that kind of reach."

The Snyders certainly seem taken with the Netflix experience, having made *Army Of The Dead* and follow-up *Army Of Thieves* for the platform before setting coordinates for *Rebel Moon*. It's easy to understand why, seeing as they've been given the rare opportunity to shoot two very expensive instalments of a franchise with no existing brand recognition back-to-back.

In the tradition of *Watchmen* and *Justice League*, Zack's also been bankrolled to make extended director's cuts of both *Rebel Moon* films. These three-hour, 18-rated behemoths may turn out to be closer to the director's original vision than the shorter, 15 releases first out of the blocks.

"The longer cuts were basically the script, and then we had to cut them down for the PG-13 [UK 15] versions to be two hours long," says Zack. "In the R-rated versions you get a much deeper mythological dive into the Motherworld and all the other worlds we visit. And when you see the director's cuts I think you really understand how much [US sci-fi comics magazine] *Heavy Metal* influences the movies.

"I feel like the PG-13 versions are much more earnest, weirdly, than the R-rated. There are moments that are incredibly upsetting, but in other moments they're more whimsical, and I feel that's the *Heavy Metal* influence. It allows them to be more of an opera, more over the top, and I think that's fun."

So how does the *Rebel Moon* of 2023/24 compare with the movie Zack envisioned all those years ago? "It's marginally close but really much different to what I thought it was going to be," he admits. "It's better, I think, in the end, because I always knew the director's cuts were going to be problematic to get made.

"It's expensive to make these big movies, and when they're this crazy it's difficult to figure out how to get them funded. But we found a vehicle to get to it, and that was by creating these PG-13 versions that I'm very proud of. They allow for a greater audience so we're able to make these more boutique-y versions of the movie."

This is what it's all been leading to...

...lots and lots of fighting. In slow motion.

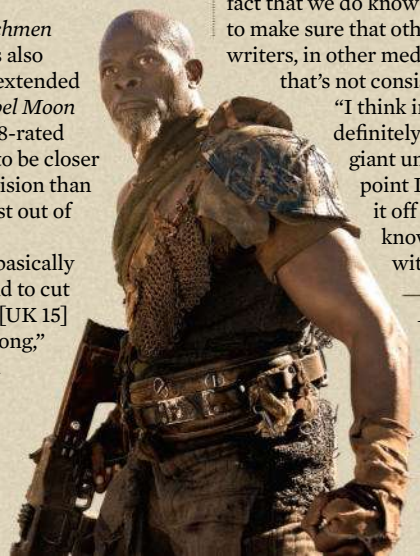
NEW MOON

So where next? The Snyders certainly don't see *The Scargiver* as the end of the *Rebel Moon* story. "I would say that this movie has a much more satisfying ending than movie one," says Zack. "We definitely have a big climax and there's closure. But it also signals forward."

In perhaps the loudest echo of *Star Wars*, the franchise is shooting for new multimedia frontiers, with a graphic novel prequel *House Of The Blood Axe* already out from Titan Comics, and a narrative podcast and animated short (about the Kali, an alien race who power the Motherworld) also in the works. If *A Child Of Fire*, *The Scargiver* and their respective director's cuts deliver for Netflix, there could also be more films. Crucially, Snyder says he knows where the story is heading.

"If we were to go forward and make more movies, we know the goal," Zack says. "The fact that we do know where it's going allows us to make sure that other stories [from other writers, in other media] don't do something that's not consistent.

"I think in an ideal world, we'd definitely have a longer arc to this giant universe, and then at that point I would be happy to hand it off to someone else. But I know what I want to do with it."



Rebel Moon: Part Two – The Scargiver is on Netflix from 19 April.

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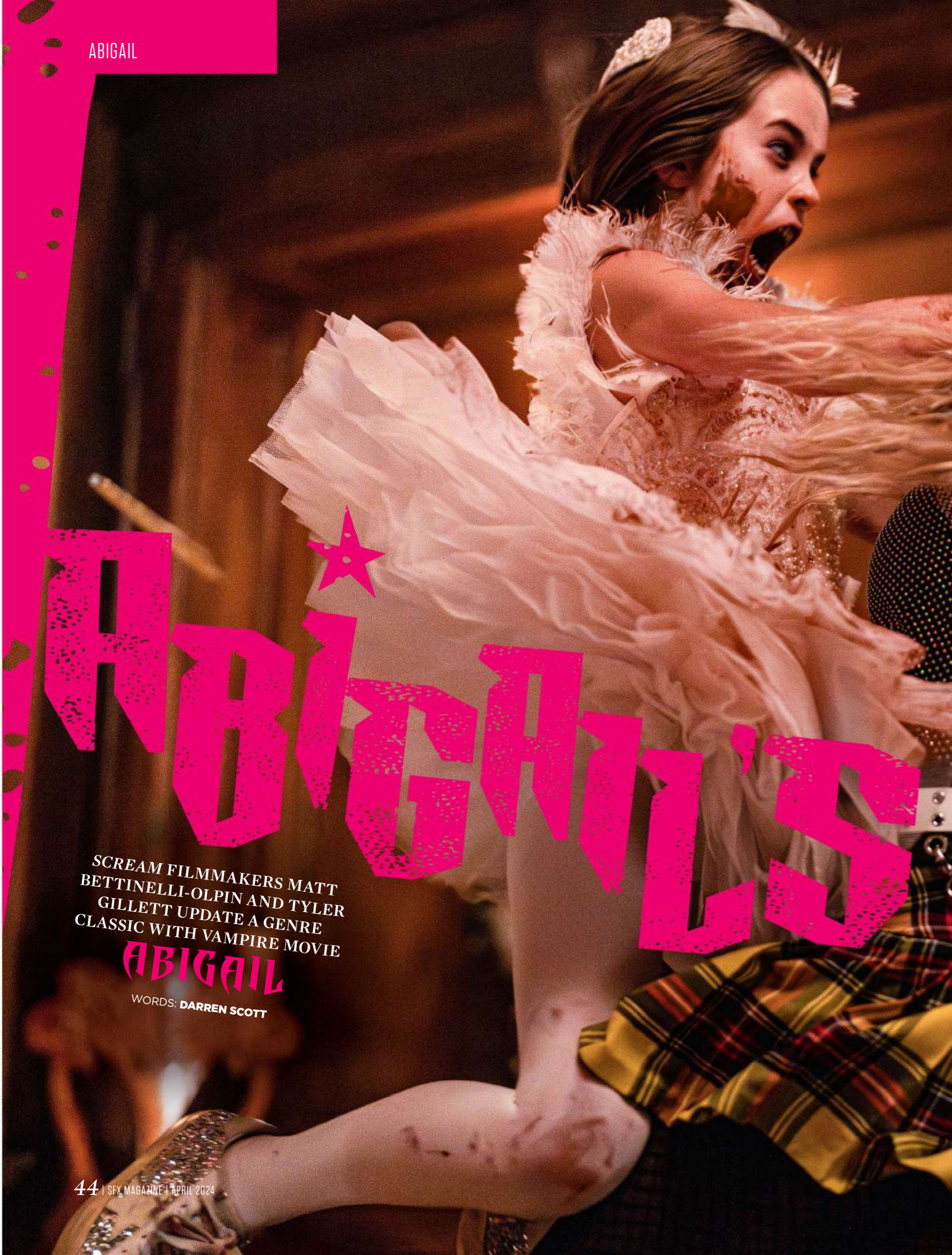


ABIGAIL'S

SCREAM FILMMAKERS MATT BETTINELLI-OLPIN AND TYLER GILLETT UPDATE A GENRE CLASSIC WITH VAMPIRE MOVIE ABIGAIL

WORDS: **DARREN SCOTT**

PARTY

ORIGINALLY ANNOUNCED AS a "secret monster movie for Universal", internet chatter has new horror *Abigail* pegged as "a reimagining of the 1936 Universal Classic Monsters film *Dracula's Daughter*". But directors Matt Bettinelli-Olpin and Tyler Gillett say that was just something writer Stephen Shields had "percolating in his head in the early stages".

"To his credit," Bettinelli-Olpin explains, "he was also thinking really smart about, 'Okay, how do I tell an original vampire story and also make it something that feels eminently sellable?' So that was, at one point, its path into the studio. Then for us it was, 'Well, let's just make it as weird and as wacky and as different while still playing in the lineage and in the lore of vampires. How do we make this its own unique flavour?'"

The pair then brought Guy Busick – who wrote *Ready Or Not*, *Scream V* and *Scream VI* – on board. "Before you know it, we're flying out to Dublin to shoot the movie. It was not the way, in our experience, movies usually get made," Gillett laughs.

MEAL DEAL

Abigail (Alisha Weir), the daughter of a powerful crime boss, is being held for a $50 million ransom. The tables are turned when the kidnappers become food for their hostage, as the girl in the ballerina costume is actually a vampire...

The directors are lifelong fans of horror. For Bettinelli-Olpin it was seeing the likes of *Predator*, *Alien* and *The Terminator* "really young", for Gillett the original *Twilight Zone*, "The best TV show of all time, period." A full-size mannequin dressed as Ghostface looms behind them as they speak to *SFX*. Despite the movie monster heritage, *Abigail* meant that having to play by a specific set of rules (as with their *Scream* films) wasn't necessary.

"It was an original idea that allowed us to make an original movie," Gillett explains. "To the studio's credit they really pushed us to be interesting, weird, experimental, go for it, take the big swings, have fun with this – and that's our sweet spot. That's what we love. So it just all kind of lined up."

Those big swings included the freedom to explore film history in unexpected ways. "Honestly, we thought that they did or might have a rule book," Bettinelli-Olpin says of Universal's legacy. "We were pleasantly surprised that they →

were like, 'Guys, just go do weird stuff. The weirder, the better. We don't want you to be servicing any idea of what something might be down the line.' They just wanted us to make the best version of an original vampire movie in the moment, throwing caution to the wind. It's really rare that you find partners that are as willing to do that, that are not afraid to take risks. It's been a really wonderful experience with them."

Vampires do, however, have an established rule book. That said, filmmakers have been tearing that up ever since *Nosferatu* in 1922.

"Once you try to figure out straight-up vampire lore, which we definitely tried, you realise, oh, everybody's just taking their own swings here," Bettinelli-Olpin explains. In *Abigail*, the kidnappers are only too aware of Anne Rice, *Twilight* and *True Blood*.

"We approach this very much as, 'How can we bring our own flavour to vampire lore' and doing that under the umbrella of 'We are the characters'. They all know what vampire lore is in pop culture. But is that really what it is? Who knows? Let's play with that!

"So the audience gets to experience our version of vampire lore with the characters as they learn what is and isn't true, and how that affects them. So it's fun, like peeling back the layers of the onion as you go with characters who also are like, 'Wait, are vampires real? Is this a real thing we're dealing with?'"

Gillett laughs. "It's such a hodgepodge. The lore, the rules of vampires are so varied, right? They turn into mist and rats. I mean, it's so absurd. So the movie is also, in a lot of ways, commentary on just how wacky vampire lore is."

Bettinelli-Olpin continues: "We love that meta-speak of having characters that are aware of movies, aware of the movies of which they find themselves in. There's an opportunity to just poke fun at that stuff."

HIGH STAKES

The pair say they do go off-book and add something new, but won't give away what original spin they've put on vampires. One thing they will say is that it's going to be *bloody*.

"There's a third-act fight in this movie that's just absolutely gonzo, it's the biggest action thing that we've done," Bettinelli-Olpin reveals. "Certainly the bloodiest thing that we've done...

"It is really a movie that is designed very intentionally to entertain, and to stir real emotion and to make you laugh and to make you scared. For us, those are the hallmarks of the movies we grew up loving."

"This one is really, I think, a love letter to those old movies that we grew up on," Gillett agrees. "But also we have the confidence to just be like, 'Yeah, fuck it, let's just make the weirdest choice.'

"So it feels a little bit like a full circle experience being back here [at Universal] making an original that is a mix of all those things that we hope to experience when we go to the movie theatre."

They're both keen to stress that *Abigail* is "just an original vampire movie" rather than a franchise or part of the growing Universal Monsters ensemble.

"We'd all be lying if we said that it wouldn't be amazing to make something that was popular enough, had legs and was zeitgeist-y enough to warrant a sequel or sequels," Bettinelli-Olpin says. "I think that there's something also really, really amazing about creating new original things that can then go on to be the franchises of the future. Those are the movies that we were born and raised on in so many ways. So creating a new version of that? Sign us up!"

Gillett adds: "Spoiler alert! Vampires don't age. So you're kind of like, 'Let's just make the best movie we can with Alisha while we can, and if we're lucky to have a sequel, that's somebody else's problem!'"

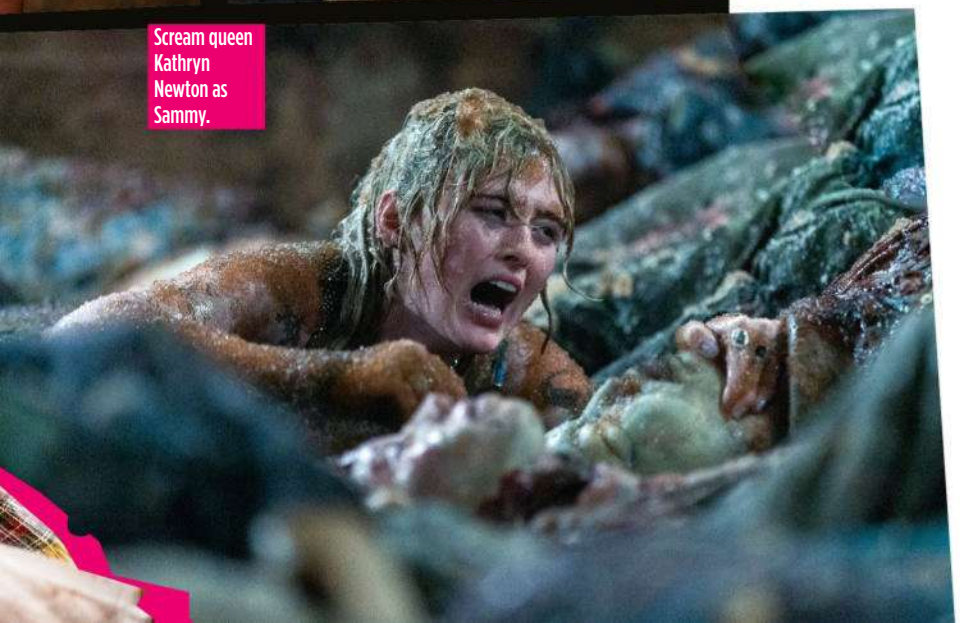
What's next for the filmmakers is "to be determined", but they don't know what's happening with the long-discussed sequel to *Escape From New York*. "There's always a complicated rights situation with titles like that, and I think that's ultimately where things are hung up," Bettinelli-Olpin says. "But we had a few fun pitches on it. We'd be crazy to try to step into John Carpenter's footsteps. We were stupid enough to step into Wes Craven's!"

Abigail is in cinemas from 19 April.

Abigail (Alisha Weir) and Peter (Kevin Durand).

Joey (Melissa Barrera): you've got red on you.

Now she's having a go at Frank (Dan Stevens).



Scream queen Kathryn Newton as Sammy.

"I LOVE BEING COVERED IN BLOOD!"

Melissa Barrera is Joey

How much of vampire lore were you aware of?
I love vampires. I love all the monsters: Dracula, Frankenstein, werewolves, love them all. I know there are different rules to different vampires in different movies. You know, the basics. But our rules in this movie are different. Let's just say that. It's cool, because sometimes I'd be like, "But what about this and that?" They'd be like, "Nope, vampires in this world are like this." A new set of rules for audiences is exciting.

Abigail's not afraid to play with humour. What was that like?
The script wasn't as funny, I think, as the movie ended up being, because Matt and Tyler really liked to let the actors improvise and do their thing. The characters are very quirky and questionable people. We had a lot of wacky improvisations that I was like, "How is this gonna fit into this movie?" The good thing about Matt and Tyler allowing everyone to just do their thing and go as wild as you want, and as ridiculous as you want, is that you can always edit, right? You have different options. So you try whatever and you find the balance, and I think they found the perfect balance with this movie.

What's it like the first time you see a vampire?
I just think it's amazing. I remember the first time that we saw Alisha in full vampire eyes, teeth, everything – she's a kid and she was freaking out seeing herself like this. We were all like, "Oh my god, you look so cool. Oh my god, it's incredible." We were very much excited and hyped that we were seeing her, and I think that also got her hyped. Because I think at the beginning, she was a little bit like, "Oh my god, I don't like this look." We were all so excited when she came out and then she just kind of owned it, it was really cool.

What was the most outrageous or "out there" moment of filming?
There's so many moments like that, that I wish that I could tell you, but they're spoilers. There's moments of scenes that we shot that were unbelievable. I just couldn't believe that we were doing the things that we were doing. There's a lot of blood in this movie. Probably more blood than any movie ever. I mean, that's a bold statement, but, like, it's a lot.

After the _Scream_ films you must be used to blood...
I'm so used to it and I *love* being covered in blood. I do. I like the way I look covered in blood, for some reason. I just think it looks hot! I like when people in movies are covered in blood and are covered in dirt. I just think it's sexy. So I do, I like being covered in blood.

Would you be up for an _Abigail_ sequel?
Yeah, obviously, of course. Why not? When a sequel happens it means that the first movie did well enough that you know there's a demand for a second one. So I'm always up for that. Getting to spend more time with a character is so delicious as an actor, getting to explore more of the character is always so nice. It is a spoiler to tell you the biggest reason why I want a sequel, so I won't tell you. But I do want a sequel!

OMEN

THE ORIGINAL DEMON SEED IS JETTING OFF TO ITALY FOR A REVISIONIST PREQUEL WITH AN INTRIGUING NEW TAKE. DIRECTOR ARKASHA STEVENSON AND ACTOR NELL TIGER FREE TEASE WHAT'S IN STORE FOR

THE FIRST OMEN

WORDS: **STUART MANNING**

"WHEN YOU GO INTO A HORROR film, I think you're prepared to be scared in a certain way. Well, this one is going to subvert that. For better or worse – it's definitely not what you're expecting. And that'll rock your core even harder, in a weird sorta way."

Director Arkasha Stevenson is choosing her words carefully as *SFX* sits down to discuss all things *Omen*. The OG Antichrist supernatural horror franchise is back in cinemas after an 18-year break, going back to its roots. But that's all we're getting in advance, as Stevenson and her female lead are keen to protect the film's secrets.

The First Omen takes the story back to 1973 Rome, where an American girl, Margaret, joins a convent, bringing her into the orbit of a murky conspiracy to bring about the birth of Damien. "She has a troubled past and a quite tumultuous childhood and has found her steadiness in faith," says *Game Of Thrones* actor Nell Tiger Free. "And, of course, that all begins to unravel..."

Stevenson, who cut her horror teeth on Netflix series *Brand New Cherry Flavor*, felt an immediate connection to the screenplay for *The First Omen*. "I fell in love with the character of Margaret. I was interested in doing a horror film that was more like a character study. That felt closest to how I had first watched *The Omen*, way back when – a story about a family going through horrible tumult. That's maybe not the most typical pitch to give a studio, but they were very into it." →

Nell Tiger Free as Margaret, Sônia Braga as Sister Silvia.

Unlike 2006's much derided remake, *The First Omen* promises a more faithful redux. Both director and lead actor are self-confessed uber-fans of Richard Donner's 1976 original, in which Gregory Peck and Lee Remick become involved in a fateful baby swap, leaving them as under-siege parents to a pre-school Satan.

Stevenson describes her film as being "in conversation with the original *Omen*", yet was also mindful that it should work on its own terms. "The main ethos of this film was to ask, 'If this weren't *The Omen*, could it be its own film?' I believe yes, it could."

Free is also keen to stress the film's value beyond its *Omen* roots. "Let's call a spade a spade here. The bar for these kinds of prequels and sequels and remakes, especially with these iconic horror franchises, is not particularly high. I think expectations might be low. It will be satisfying to show what we've made because I don't think that it's what people are going to be expecting, whatsoever."

As director, Stevenson also drew inspiration from the original *Omen*'s stablemates in American New Wave horror. "I watched *The Exorcist* and *Rosemary's Baby*. It was just this marathon of parents being terrified of their children, you know? In the '60s and the '70s, a cultural revolution was going on in America – the hippie revolution, people revolting against the Vietnam War – and people were terrified of this new philosophy.

"Right now, it almost feels like we're experiencing the backlash of that. We flew out to Rome to shoot the film on the day that the six-week abortion ban was announced in Texas. Our generation is now possibly facing the reversal of everything that happened in the '60s and the '70s. And that's terrifying."

Stevenson sees *The First Omen* as an opportunity to bring a female sensibility to a classic horror subject. "I grew up being in love with the horror genre and slasher films," she says. "Even though I was obsessed with horror, a lot of the harm that was inflicted on bodies – at least female bodies – made me uncomfortable because it felt hyper-sexualised and fetishised.

"It's exciting for me to be able to explore body horror and the female body through a non-sexualised lens. To talk about what I think all women grow up in fear of – what's going to be done to their bodies, what other peoples' intents are for their bodies."

As the subject for this exploration, Free was tasked with bringing an intense character journey to life. "In the last six years of my career, all the material I've done has been relatively heavy," she says. "I've had to create a bit of a shield so that it doesn't linger for too long. In this movie, we're dealing with some of the heaviest content that I've ever had to act out. There are days when you go home and it's difficult to just turn your brain off and put *Friends* on."

Director Arkasha Stevenson calls the shots.

FORCE OF HABIT

Margaret's American accent and dowdy wardrobe provided a helpful divide between work and downtime for the English Free. "I spend the majority of the movie in a nun's wimple, and you don't feel like yourself when you dress starkly differently to how you would day-to-day," she suggests. "Dress anybody up in a certain way, and they start to assimilate that persona and that character. Costume and make-up is a very useful, powerful medium."

The character's evolving look also helped Free to pace her performance across the story. "When you're not filming chronologically, you have to ground yourself in each moment. We had different phases of make-up and hair and my costume, which helped as an anchor as to what her state of mind was in that moment. But that's kind of what we all do every day, isn't it?" she laughs. "Just jump from various states of panic."

The First Omen was filmed entirely in Rome, making the most of the city's vibrant architecture and rich history. "Rome is such an interesting place," says Stevenson. "I'm from LA, which is very widespread – you just keep building out. Rome is just built on top of *itself*. We went deep into the basement catacombs of this one church, and all of a sudden you're in another church from hundreds of years ago.

"You become very cognisant of the fact that you're surrounded by ghosts. For [Margaret], a woman who is slowly tapping into her intuition and listening to her own voice, to do that in a city where you're just surrounded by millions of whispering voices, I think is really powerful."

The real-life locations added some welcome verisimilitude for the actors too. "You would

It's that nice Bill Nighy, as Cardinal Lawrence.

SOUNDS SINISTER

Tipping the hat to Jerry Goldsmith

The original *Omen* featured an extraordinary score by Jerry Goldsmith, whose faux-Gregorian chanting has been much copied and parodied since. Incoming composer Mark Korven, whose music brought pervasive disquiet to Robert Eggers's *The Lighthouse* and *The Witch*, has largely forged a new path for *The First Omen*.

"We're recording the score right now," says Arkasha Stevenson. "There was some talk of using the Goldsmith score, but we wanted to find our own feel and flavour. Mark has created something so, so special – he's such an interesting artist. His score has added another character to the film. We do have some special moments where we do use Goldsmith, but *only* in key moments."

KATJA OGRIN/REDFERNS/GETTY

“It was important to try and make it feel like it was shot in 1971”

walk out onto the street and it would feel like you’d stepped into a completely different decade,” says Free. “The first time I saw the way they had dressed the streets – with the cars and the costumes for the background actors – it was kind of overwhelming. It really did feel like you had just walked out of a time machine.”

But history comes with its restrictions. “Rome can be a very difficult place to shoot because you are essentially filming in a museum,” adds Stevenson. “There are a lot of rules, understandably. So we were very lucky to shoot on the streets. Rome is like another character in our film. It’s not a *Roman Holiday* postcard, but you definitely feel Rome in our movie.”

In keeping with the period setting, the filmmakers took a deliberately low-fi approach, favouring practical effects and vintage filming techniques. While Stevenson was not able to shoot on 35mm film, she was keen to bring an analogue sensibility to the digital photography.

“It was important to try and make it feel like it was shot in 1971,” she explains. “So our lighting reflects the ’70s Kodak film stock that was used in *Jaws*, *The Godfather*, *Chinatown* – all that stuff. We also tried to use a lot of old-school filming techniques to make it feel like we were using a classical, heavy camera.”

Although the close-knit company enjoyed a generally hassle-free shoot, a touch of good old-fashioned superstition lurked on the sidelines. “There was this one day where we were filming in a piazza,” recalls Stevenson. “The actors were having a bit of a tough time... I was ‘off’ and couldn’t explain anything very well.

“Our VFX team always takes photos of the locations that we’re in. I mentioned this to one of them, who said, ‘Oh, yeah, of course, you were a little messed-up that day – the circumference of the piazza was 666 feet.’ I don’t know if it was true, but that was very strange. *Straaange*.”

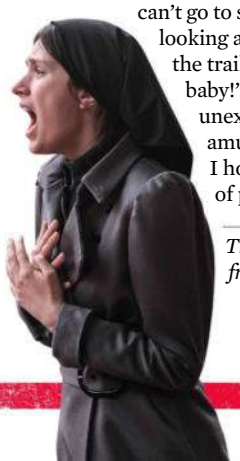
Despite a taxing role far from home, Free relished the experience. “Everyone put their blood, sweat and tears into it. There was one particular day where we had very intense scenes back-to-back. We ended at five in the morning on this street in the middle of nowhere in Northern Italy.

“Everyone was exhausted, kind of freaked out and terrified, but it was the best feeling because we were all so united and together. It was an amazing moment. You’ll probably know what scene I’m talking about after the film comes out.”

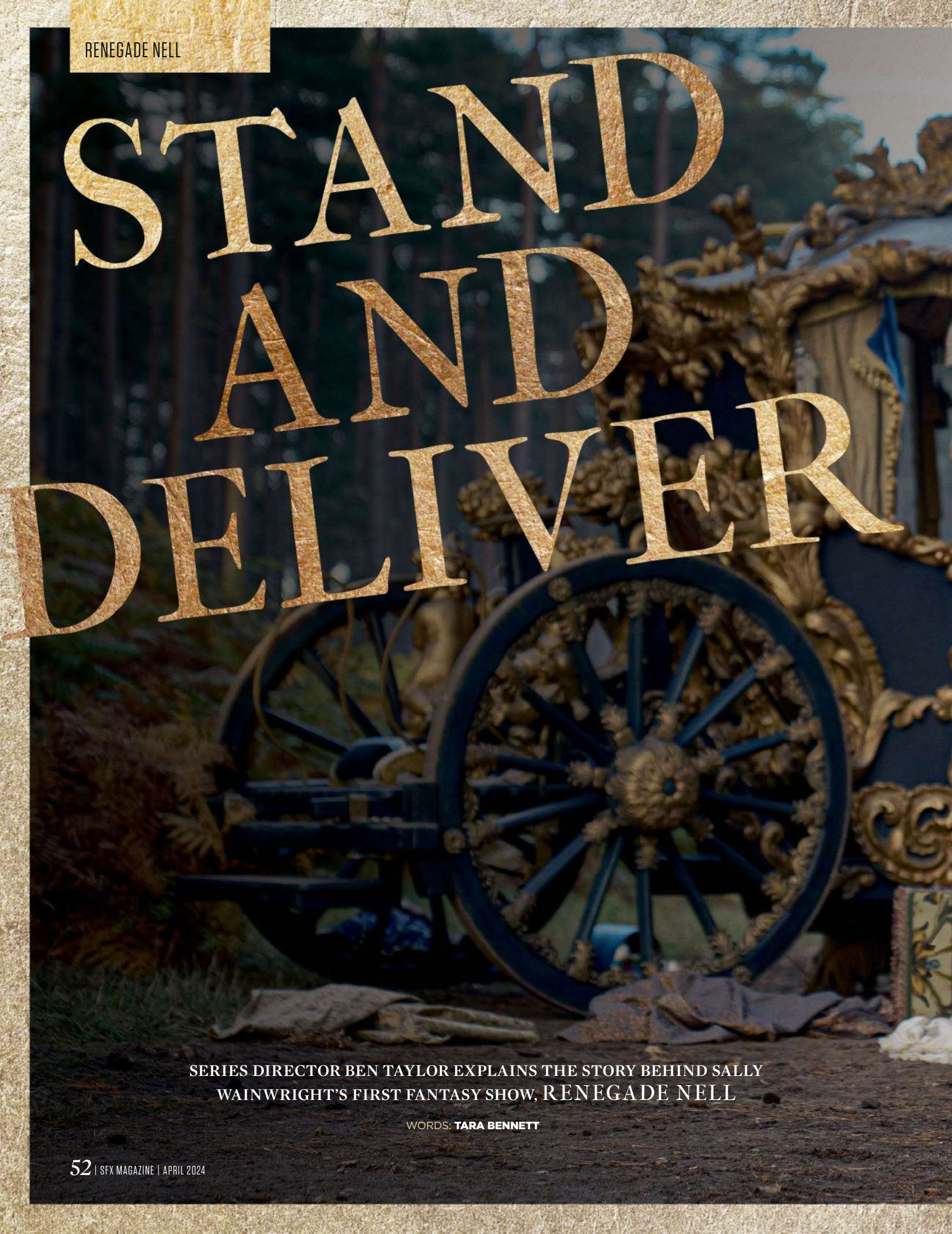
And with that, we’re back to secrets. Whatever surprises *The First Omen* has in store, its makers feel confident that it will wrongfoot audiences.

“I have a tendency to trawl YouTube comments when it’s four in the morning and I can’t go to sleep,” says Free. “I’m enjoying looking at everybody’s theories [about the trailer] because everybody’s wrong, baby!” We should expect the unexpected, then? She nods, amused. “Everybody is wrong! I hope we scare the shit out of people.”

The First Omen is in cinemas from 5 April.



STAND AND DELIVER



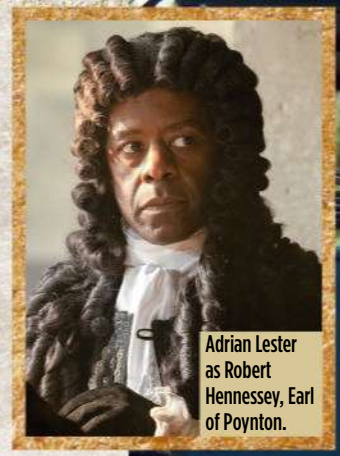
SERIES DIRECTOR BEN TAYLOR EXPLAINS THE STORY BEHIND SALLY WAINWRIGHT'S FIRST FANTASY SHOW, RENEGADE NELL

WORDS: **TARA BENNETT**

A PERIOD PIECE HIGHWAYMAN – er, woman – drama featuring a tiny folkloric companion named Billy Blind doesn't exactly scream likely sell. But when you add that it's been conceived and written by BAFTA-award-winning writer Sally Wainwright and directed by Ben Taylor of *Sex Education* fame, the imminent arrival of their new Disney+ series *Renegade Nell* makes a lot more sense.

As the acclaimed writer of critically lauded series like *Happy Valley* and *Gentleman Jack*, Wainwright has gained a robust following of fans obsessed with her dramas, which often centre on compelling female characters. To date, her creations for TV have been grounded historical pieces or contemporary police dramas (barring the 2013 one-off *The Last Witch*). But *Renegade Nell* has a twist...

The eight-part series stars Louisa Harland (*Derry Girls*) as the eponymous character, the sharp-tongued eldest daughter of a tavern keeper in Tottenham, circa 1705. Having left home four years earlier to marry a sea captain, she's left widowed and returns to her father and two young sisters imbued with a mysterious power. When she inhales a tiny glowing light, she becomes almost invulnerable in combat, as she wields the power to exact →



Adrian Lester as Robert Hennessey, Earl of Poynton.

Joely Richardson plays Lady Eularia.

justice upon those committing crimes against the unfortunate – such as highwaymen, or the entitled aristocracy.

Taylor explains to *SFX* that *Renegade Nell* was the writer's passion project, first drafted almost a decade ago. At the time, it was considered too big a story for a two-hour film and far beyond the size of a typical BBC television budget.

However, the rise of streaming services looking for event series inspired Wainwright to pull it out of the proverbial drawer so that Disney+ could bring it to life as a cliffhanger-filled story with plenty of derring-do and magical intrigue.

Coming off three seasons of directing *Sex Education*, Taylor says he was looking for something to shake him out of his creative comfort zone. His producing partner Jon Jennings rang him about a pilot script, saying, "I've just read this thing. It's absolutely mad. And potentially brilliant." It was Wainwright's script for *Renegade Nell*. Her name alone was enough for Taylor to sign on.

After he finally read it, Taylor remembers that he was delighted to find it had the ambition inherent to all of Wainwright's writing. "I wanted to bring out the scale of it and the irresistible mix of genre and tone which excites me and is also scary, as I'm sure you can imagine," he says. "You're mixing things like fantasy, action, comedy, period, violence, feminism, and they're all in the script. There's a madness to it that I really love and we really embraced."

"Sally and I were both really interested in how a Western would work in England"

At the heart of the series is Nell and her family, who are being terrorised by Thomas Blancheford (Jake Dunn), the black-hearted son of their local Lord Magistrate (Pip Torrens). When Nell confronts the bully, he beats her to a pulp until a little light appears...

Then the tables turn and she gets to batter the villain in a deliciously cathartic melee that sets the stage for the complex troubles that will dog Nell and her kin throughout the series.

"It's such a glorious moment," Taylor says of the fight that establishes her heroic potential. "You need her and you want her to win. And you're in a Disney [show], so you're allowed to deal with 'goodies' and 'baddies', which is so great. But the flaws that Sally then imbues within these 'goodies' isn't just cut and dried either."

As the season unfolds, we follow Nell's travails as she tries to evade the villain Thomas and his magic-curious sister Sofia (Alice Kremelberg), with the help of her foppish highwayman ally Charles Devereux (Frank Dillane), and the tiny fairy Billy Blind (Nick Mohammed), who appears when she seems to need him most.

Taylor calls Nell a perfect example of a "Wainwrightian" hero: a female character who holds her ground when the darkness comes at them. "You can see the common thread in [*Happy Valley*'s] Catherine Cawood, Anne Lister in *Gentleman Jack*, and then Nell," he points out. "They clearly share some DNA."

While the series seemingly assumes the mantle of a historical drama, Taylor says he and Wainwright actually built Nell's story to parallel a classic American Western. "Sally and I were both really interested in how a Western would work in England," he explains.

"Something that I've always loved with that genre is the idea of [a character] regretting one's actions," he adds. "That something that feels right and just and appropriate in the moment can have repercussions that will echo onwards – they will haunt you.

"In this, the idea is that a hot-headed Nell takes one piece of action to defend her sister's honour, then she has less than 24 hours of being able to celebrate that feeling of good before her father dies, which is unavoidably her fault," he teases of a plot point. "The

THE HIGHWAY HELLION

Louisa Harland blasts baddies with magic as Nell Jackson

What sold you on playing the character of Nell?
When I auditioned, I actually hadn't read any of the scripts. I just was given the scenes to audition. It's a credit to Sally, who is such an incredible writer, that I knew who the character was, even from the scenes. She didn't really have to pitch it to me. Sally Wainwright and Disney combined... it's everything we never knew we needed – and, thank god, we have.

What do you admire about Nell?
It is really refreshing to see such a strong, funny, flawed woman portrayed on screen and, I think, a fabulous sign of our times.

When did you find out who your Billy was going to be?
I actually didn't even know Nick was playing the role until maybe six months into the shoot. The most frustrating thing about it was not being able to work with Nick, because I'm such a huge fan. He's an incredible comedic actor. I know how much I would have enjoyed and taken from that.

Enyi Okoronkwo as Rasselas and Louisa Harland as Nell.

Jake Dunn as Thomas: what an enormous fop.

complexity of that I absolutely loved. And that is the story engine."

Another engine is the conviction of Louisa Harland's performance as the compassionate and morally driven Nell. Taylor says that matching the right actor to the role was integral to the success of the series, as they couldn't imagine the rest of the world until they cast Harland.

"All sorts of details trickle down from her," Taylor explains. "She's such a tonal reference point for everything and everyone around her. When we were designing Nell and casting, we used the term 'anarchic' and 'punk' quite frequently," he says of the character. "She's unapologetic. She's absolutely, definitively, her own person, and she's a really lovely, complex box of contradictions as well."

Taylor adds that Harland not only embodied Nell perfectly, but was also the linchpin in connecting the human story to the magical story involving Billy Blind (who's based on a spirit who appears in several old ballads). It's through him that Nell gets her abilities to rise up and vanquish those responsible for ill-doing. Taylor says that Billy always featured in Wainwright's scripts, and was not added after Disney+ bought the series. Practically, they had to figure out the best way to integrate the fairy into a live-action story in a way that felt organic and believable, and that was doable as a recurring effect.

"The way into the fantasy for Sally – and then me when I took it over in terms of executing it and visualising it – was not being afraid of it," he explains. "We tended to use fantasy as a word less than we used folklore. It was all about grounding those [magical] elements confidently, rather than being fearful of them."

MAGIC TOUCH

One way they did that was by defining the rules of Nell's powers within the world. "Because we weren't based on an existing IP and we weren't a comic book, the rules were absolutely ours to define," he says. "They were really fun to get to. There's always been something that I've been attracted to with the downtrodden rising up. In this genre, which is so masculine and so testosterone-led, to see [Nell] standing up to that and absolutely bulldozing over someone was really thrilling."

Then it was about portraying the quieter moments as Nell and Billy formed their uneasy friendship. Taylor explains that they decided to do all of the season's principal photography first, then hired comedian Mohammed to come in as an entirely greenscreened character, inserted into the existing footage through visual effects.

"I love that it was unfussy," Taylor says of their technique. "When we were dealing with the VFX teams and vendors, we'd often use the words blunt and heavy. It's difficult because it's sacrilegious in Disney terms, but we didn't want to 'Tinkerbell' the feeling," he says of the fairy's look.

"You wanted a companion for Nell, and if it was just this beautiful thing buzzing around, it would piss her off," he chuckles. "So, we wanted to find this level of believable, where he's an irritant but he also becomes a really close companion."

Because for all the fighting and machinations, Taylor says, the heart of the series resides in Nell and Billy's belief in her. "She's a hero of few words, and that can only get you so far," he says.

"You need somebody that can be her confidante and scared with her, and inspire and push her because she's a mess," he laughs. "She's not the finished article. She's a hero but as we see, a reluctant hero."

Renegade Nell is on Disney+ from 29 March.

NELL'S NEMESIS

Alice Kremelberg plays her rival, Sofia Wilmot

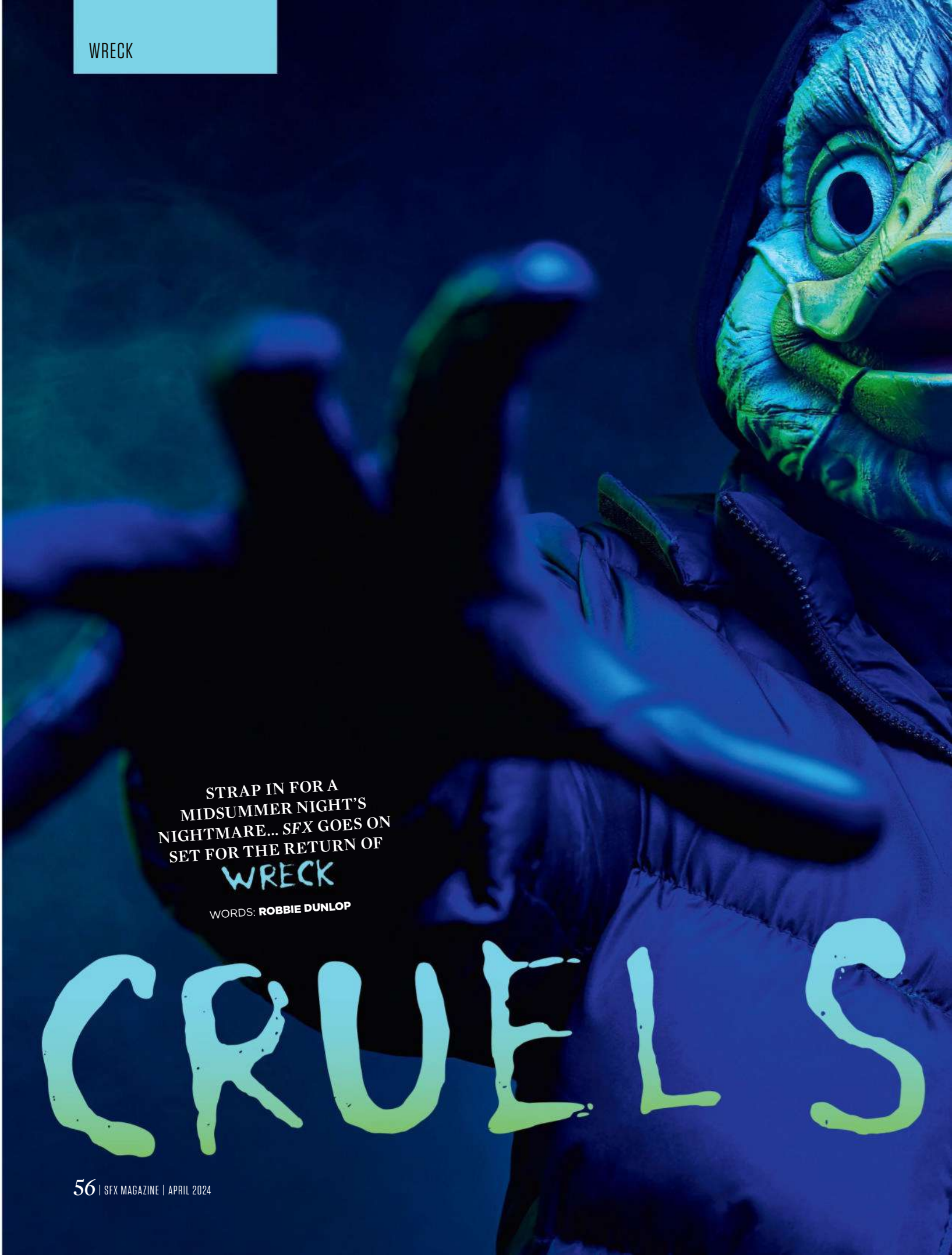
As another marginalised woman of the time, Sofia betrays Nell. Is she a villain?

She really doesn't feel like she has a voice in the beginning. Even though she's very intelligent already, she doesn't have a platform or anywhere to release that. When she's finally able to, bit by bit, that excitement consumes her. She's finally able to touch a bit of power and a voice that she sees in Nell, that I think makes her really jealous. Like, "How come she gets to do all that cool stuff?" So I think she does start morally strong and gets a bit carried away.

Nick Mohammed as Tinkerbell... sorry, Billy.

"We're never getting the ball down from there."

POV: you've just made a huge faux pas over tea.



STRAP IN FOR A MIDSUMMER NIGHT'S NIGHTMARE... *SFX* GOES ON SET FOR THE RETURN OF WRECK

WORDS: **ROBBIE DUNLOP**

CRUELS

UMMER

Phill Martin as the mysterious Creep: slicey dicey!

AUGUST 2023. *SFX* IS considerably high up a disused office block in Belfast city centre, sheltering from the blistering heat. Here, camera rehearsals are underway on the second series of BBC Three horror hit *Wreck*.

It's the storm before the calm. Loud bangs and crashes from unseen construction workers reverberate across the room's bare, stone walls, while production crew mill around with paperwork and chirruping radio mics. A recording is looming...

As is frightfully tall actor Phill Martin. He's pacing back and forth to one side, carrying a plastic duck mask. Could this be...? A closer inspection reveals that no, it isn't. Not *quite*.

A monitor – the focus of half-a-dozen seated crew members – feeds an image of the filming set-up behind a nearby soundproofing curtain. We glimpse a suited man standing at an open window, gazing out onto the bustling Northern Irish capital. This is actor Joseph Arkley, playing Thomas Deveraux, a key member of shadowy mega-corporation Velorum.

A hush is called, and the room falls deathly silent – even the construction workers have downed their tools.

"Action!"

"Aquamarine or duck egg blue?" Thomas is deliberating on the colour scheme of Velorum's new London headquarters. On hand to offer office décor advice is a familiar face from series one: Officer Beaker (Warren James Dunning).

But Beaker has relinquished his familiar cruise ship uniform and – as the sea of tower blocks outside makes clear – we're not going to find a cruise ship this far ashore. What gives?

THE WILD LIFE

During a break in the filming of what we later discover is a key flashback, *SFX* sits down with *Wreck* creator and writer, Ryan J Brown. The first series made quite a splash, didn't it?

"It was mad," Brown smiles. "I always knew that it would be a slow growth, but the audience has grown and grown. It's really nice hearing from people all around the world. It's so unexpected and so lovely."

Series two picks up six months after Velorum was exposed for allowing wealthy guests to engage in human-hunting bloodsports on board luxury cruise ship the Sacramentum. Now former shipmates Jamie (Oscar Kennedy) and Vivian (Thaddea Graham), along with a gang of fellow survivors, are endeavouring to take down their former boss.

"It's kind of a David and Goliath thing," says Brown. "At every turn they're failing. Nearly everyone took pay-outs and hush money, so they're at a complete loss."

After a whistle-blower informs the group of Velorum's latest venture – a wellness festival in Slovenia – they discover that the corporation has its sights set on *them*... "They're like, 'Do we hide and hope that we survive, or do we take the battle to Velorum, the last place they'd look for us?'"

The relocation from the confined corridors of a ship at sea to lush, open green fields in Central Europe is all part of Brown's multi-series masterplan.

"I wanted each series to feel like its own thing. In the history of horror, sequels take you to different places and so I wanted to have a very different feel and look, in terms of references, aesthetics and style.

Cormac (Peter Claffey) shoots off.

Oscar Kennedy, Jodie Tyack and Thaddea Graham.

"The palette, the look, is kind of folk horror-inspired," Brown continues, citing *The Wicker Man* and *Midsommar* as visual and thematic influences, "But there's lots of slasher films – from *Ready Or Not* to *Friday The 13th* – in there as well."

Filming took place in Belfast over summer 2023. "We're out in the wilderness for a lot of series two which has been so nice; they've got some incredible locations here," Brown beams. "The production team have built some of the best sets I've ever seen.

"We've got a chapel, an old mansion, and a cabin in the woods – *Evil Dead*, eat your heart out! It's everything that's tropey and recognisable, but we're doing our own spin on it." The wellness festival is set on the estate of the wealthy Deveraux family, who have personal stakes in Velorum. "We unravel the mythology of them. You really start to understand who Velorum is, where they come from; you put a face to the evil."

Buck Braithwaite is Tristan: like, *dude*.

> **"It's really nice hearing from people all around the world. It's so unexpected and lovely"**

One of their faces may be especially familiar. It was a "dream come true" for Brown when cult TV institution Alan Dale accepted the role of patriarch and Velorum CEO Owen Deveraux. "He was in *Lost* which is one of my favourite shows ever; it kind of got me into storytelling, really. He said he was a big fan of *Wreck*. I thought, 'What, really?' And actually, it was true. He had watched the first series and loved it.

"The characters he plays are often very intimidating, nasty pieces of work, and in *Wreck* there are some moments where he's really been able to up the psycho factor. There's one particular scene in a dungeon where he delivers some of the scariest shit I've ever seen. He's incredible."

Owen has two children: Thomas (Joseph Arkley, currently in rehearsals behind the curtain), and this series' Big Bad, Devon, played by Niamh Walsh.

Brown gleefully likens Walsh's performance to →

ROUGH JUSTICE

HAS THE GORE BEEN RAMPED UP EVEN FURTHER THIS SEASON?

Thaddea Graham (Vivian): Oh, *hugely*.

Oscar Kennedy (Jamie): Tenfold. It's really been ramped up for sure. Episode one, straight out the gate. It's pretty full on.

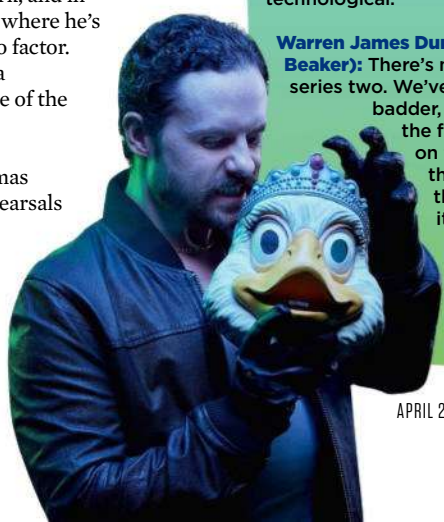
Peter Claffey (Cormac): It's gory like you wouldn't believe. And this is the thing: I'm so proud to have been a part of series one and the gore was great, but I wouldn't be *too* squeamish, and there were only certain aspects that really made me jump. This series has moved up a level, big time. There's a lot more stunt aspects and an awful lot more gruesome killings. It's much more brutal.

Phill Martin (the Creep): I'm a horror lover, and yeah there are some nice gory gags. There's a character from the first series who gets into a bit of a fight with the Creep. That really was one of the standout moments. Every time the Creep gets a little face-off with someone or meets one of our favourite characters from the original... yeah, I've appreciated all the moments like that!

Oscar Kennedy: One of my favourites was a parasol between some heads, which was pretty good.

Thaddea Graham: I liked that one. I also liked... There's some really gory, kind of burning shit that goes on, one of those things you want to look away from. You're like, "I can't stop watching, I don't *want* to watch but it's so fascinating." They did a lot of practical effects on that, but they're also going to add in VFX. It's going to be really cool to see, the combination of the practical and the technological.

Warren James Dunning (Officer Beaker): There's more jeopardy in series two. We've gone bigger, badder, and bloodier. I saw the first one as *Alien*; it's on this little craft, and the second one is on the planet. This time it's wide, it's kinda blown wide open. Everyone's game. They're fighting for their lives.



Everyone's having an absolutely splendid time.

BOY TROUBLE

WHO'S THE CREEP?

Thaddea Graham: Creepy! He's such an ominous presence – an entity of little words; very contained and very still. He's so scary. When Phill stands there with the mask on, it's like, "Oh my god."

Oscar Kennedy: He's like Quacky but bigger, scarier, and more intimidating. More capable of violence.

TG: Less fluffy!

OK: Quacky in series one, we knew there was a person behind there, a very troubled person. Whereas with the Creep, we have no idea who or what they are.

TG: Also, although Quacky was quite capable, it's still somebody in a duck suit. There are limitations. Quacky can't see full vision, and I could probably outrun him. The Creep feels scarier.

Warren James Dunning: He's a machine, let's just put it that way. He's a mean machine! We've become a little duo, me and the Creep. It's an odd pairing. We have moments together. My height and his height – it's visually entertaining.

Peter Claffey: He's seven-foot tall and constantly there, looming around the characters. He's a little bit more terrifying than the duck!

Phill Martin: He's a mystery of a character. The way we're introduced to him: he's a force. He seemingly has a one-track mind in his motives and what he wants to do, but you discover more about him as the show goes on, where he comes from and perhaps a little bit of his history.

PC: Phill couldn't be more opposite to the Creep; he's a really lovely guy and it's been great getting to know him. I've had a couple of decent scenes with him too, which has been good fun.

"Gwyneth Paltrow on acid. Devon is terrifying, but also really human and vulnerable. She is the one leading the festival; it's her thing. She managed to get her dad to agree to do it at their ancestral home, so she's moved in all of her crazy wellness madness into this huge space. Niamh brought so much to the role."

HOTLINE TO HEAVEN

Brown admits that his long-term plan for *Wreck* was risky. "For the first series, we decided to focus on the characters, on building a family. And now, in series two, we're tearing them apart.

"I was working out the death count," he continues, with the relish of a dyed-in-the-wool horror fan (which he is), "and the first episode has more deaths than the entirety of series one. I wanted to let people know, 'Think of that as the prequel and now we're delivering the main course'."

To whet our appetites, Brown teases a few of the second series' most shocking slayings. "We've got faces burning off, drills to the head. We've got shish-kebabing, asphyxiation, decapitation and stabbing. We've got everything. Stuff that I'd never have thought in a million years would be on the BBC!

"In episode one there is a massacre. A big, explosive sequence where there are multiple deaths. That was really fun to write because I was trying to top each one, trying to find inventive ways for people to die.

"But what was really important to me – and this is where horror can sometimes fall short – is that you *feel* each death, that it really hits hard when it's a character you care about. That's something I've been conscious of. Even though there are tons of deaths, each one

Jamie and Olly (Anthony Rickman).

GOT TO GET AWAY

ON HORROR HISTORY

Oscar, your character Jamie is named after Jamie Lee Curtis. Do you have a favourite Jamie Lee Curtis film?

Oscar Kennedy: The only Jamie Lee Curtis films that I've watched – the two I know I've watched – are *Everything Everywhere All At Once* and the first *Halloween*. So I'd probably go for *Halloween* because of how iconic it is. I'm a massive fan of the horror genre.

Thaddea, do you have a favourite horror film?

Thaddea Graham: I'm such a scaredy cat, I'm scared of everything! But I really liked *Train To Busan*, because it's so character-driven and emotional. There are lots of zombies – but I can look past that!

I think making horror is so much fun, a very unique thing to do. Like with *Wreck* series one and the chainsaw fight, there's no way that I'd be waterboarded with fake blood and syrup anywhere else! I couldn't open my eyes, I had to be walked off set and dunked into a bucket to be reset, to go again. But it was really fun.

"Quacky was terrifying, but with the Creep we've taken things to the next level"

hopefully earns its place." This all means that Brown was mindful of sending his victims out in memorably grisly ways. "I always promise – and we've delivered on it so far – that if you're going out, you're going out big. Or in the most heartbreaking of ways, so that it'll be one to remember.

"We've had to say goodbye to some people who have been around since the beginning, and that's been really tough. People who are now close friends. Letting them know, 'Hey, you're unemployed now!' is not the most ideal, but I think they all understand that it's what the show requires.

"I always buy 'deepest sympathy' cards and a nice little gift to soften the blow," he smiles. He's not joking about that, either: "I've been into the Card Factory shop in Belfast many times. They must think I know a lot of people who are ill!"

And what of the menacing Quacky, from the first season? "Quacky made a really big impact," says Brown of the Sacramentum's maniacal mascot, who has flown the, erm, crow's nest this time round. Slashing through festival-goers in his place is the seven-foot Creep.

"Quacky was terrifying, but with the Creep we've taken things to the next level. He's Michael Myers meets Jason Voorhees. People will be having nightmares."

The Creep may still rustle some feathers. "There's a reason why he's wearing the duck mask," Brown reveals. "It's explained. But in the immediate, it's kind of like in *You're Next*; as if he's wearing it to hide his identity because he's out murdering these kids."

Among those who may encounter the "unstoppable killing machine" are *The Voice* finalist Sam Buttery, *Britain's Got Talent* child protégé Shaheen Jafargholi, *Heartstopper*'s Bradley Riches, and *Class* star Greg Austin, playing festival therapist Joseph.

"Joseph has a very close bond and relationship with Jamie and there may be a thing there," teases Brown of potential summertime love. "Could we have a bit of *Call Me By Your Name* on our hands?"

The newcomers join a flock of Sacramentum survivors including crew manager Karen (Harriet Webb), crew members Lauren (Amber Grappy), Olly (Anthony Rickman), Cormac (Peter Claffey), and Rosie (Miya Ocego). Also dragged back for an onshore encore is the ship's cabaret performer Gloria Hole ("Queen of Ireland" Panti Bliss).

"We deepen a lot of the relationships from series one and take them further, which has been such a joy to write," Brown says. "We go to an extremely dark place by the end. A place where people will be thinking, 'How the hell are they going to come back from this? How has it got to this point?' We take the characters on a really intense journey. Nothing will ever be the same again..."

One thing's for sure. It's going to be a cruel, cruel summer.

Wreck is on BBC Three and iPlayer in April.

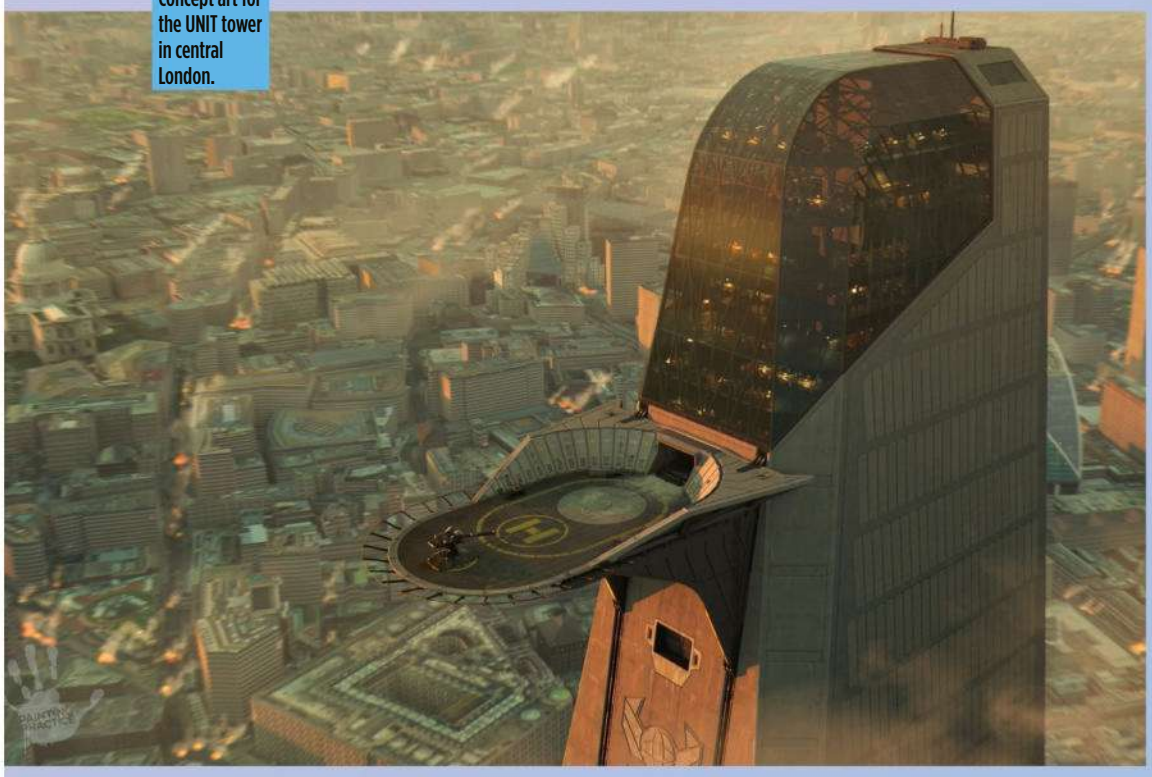
UNIVERSAL/ALAMY

DESIGNING DOCTOR WHO

Concept art, featuring a very smiley Toymaker.

THE TEAM FROM AUTOMATIK VFX AND WORLDBUILDING DESIGN STUDIO PAINTING PRACTICE REVEAL THE VISUAL SECRETS OF "THE GIGGLE" AND "THE CHURCH ON RUBY ROAD"

WORDS: **NICK SETCHFIELD**



Concept art for the UNIT tower in central London.

UNIT TOWER

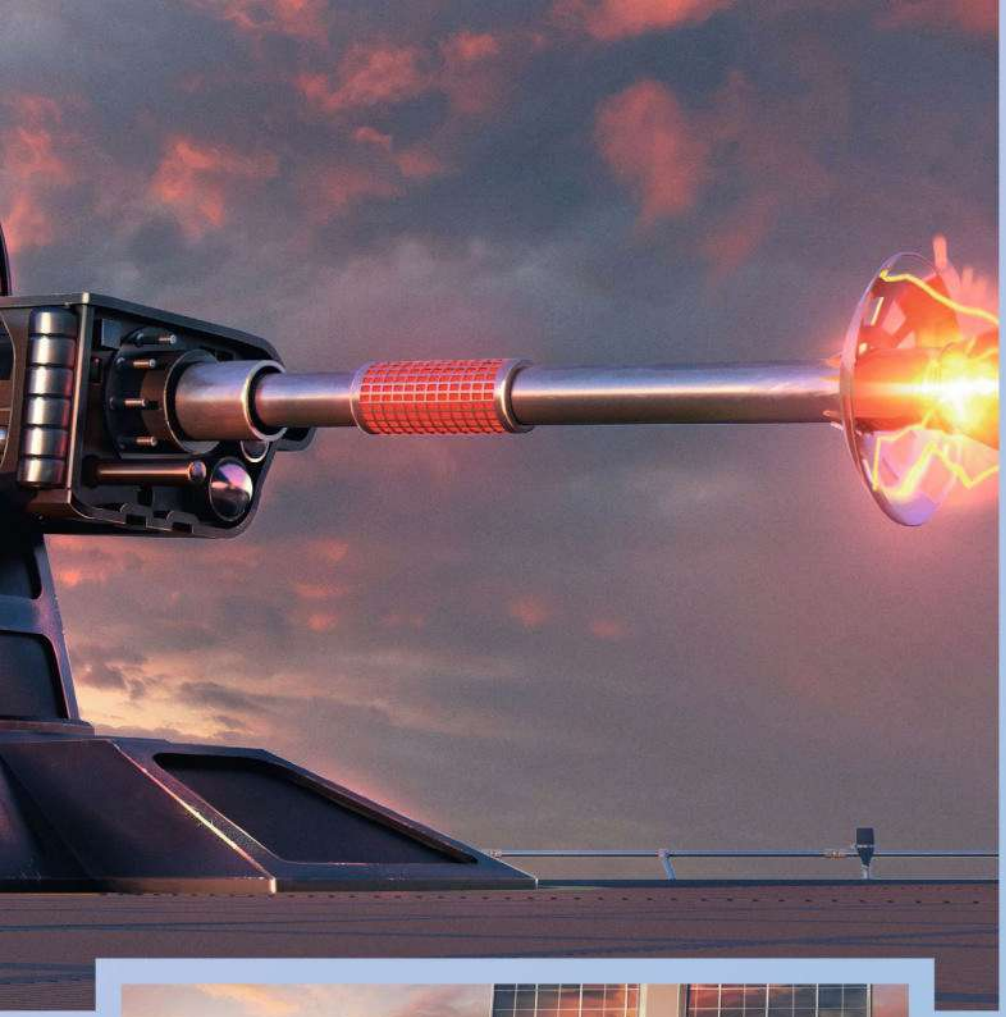
Dan May, Painting Practice co-founder and VFX Supervisor: We looked at some classic strong tower shapes like the Shard and did many, many different versions of the silhouette. We were conscious of trying to emulate the beauty and simplicity of Marvel's Stark Tower, but at the same time having ownership in our own version.

Seb Barker, VFX Supervisor and founder of Automatik VFX: The script really defined the design in many ways, just in terms of what the tower had to perform and how the characters interacted with it.

Dan: One of the biggest things for me was where it was going to go in the London skyline and how we were going to integrate it. I very quickly plonked it where I thought it would look best, in that cluster of buildings opposite the Shard.

It's a lovely little cluster that feels like a mini London Manhattan. It felt the right place to put it, but more importantly it had lots of good access points in terms of where we could fly towards it, whether it was down the river or across the river. We did move it around once or twice, but broadly speaking it stayed where I'd put it.

Seb: I went up and directed the helicopter shoot and we shot all the [plates] to put this thing in. Many bags of sick later, we had that material!



More concept art, of the Doctor being zapped.

Now *that's* a sonic screwdriver, pal.

Film plate, 3D wireframe and final composite.

UNIT TOWER HELIPAD

Erica McEwan, Painting Practice creative director and graphics art director: There were originally some guard rails! They were removed for the jeopardy factor.
Seb: It was purely the catch sequence at the end. It was the scene Russell wanted the most jeopardy for. I remember the conversation when he took them away! There was talk of a barrier that extended up to a certain height around it, basically to save on the amount of VFX we'd do. In hindsight I'm really glad we didn't do that, because you wouldn't see the horizon of London. It would have made it feel much smaller.
Erica: The floor of the set was actually the ground. It was just the backlot.

THE GALVANIC BEAM GUN

Erica: The design would have been very much driven by [production designer] Phil Sims and the concept team worked really closely with him, back and forth.
Seb: There's a slightly industrial quality to it.
Dan: There were many versions of this. It wasn't a particularly straightforward thing to get right. Originally there was quite a big number about how the gun itself came out. We had ones that came up from underneath, but because it's such a big thing we couldn't make it go too fast, otherwise it would start to look a bit fake, But at the same time it could get quite dry watching robotics coming up and down buildings. Obviously super-geeky fans love all that stuff but story-wise it needs to zip along, so we found a happy medium.

IMAGES: PAINTING PRACTICE

The current Grades is at 44 Broad Street, location fans.

THE TOYMAKER'S SHOP FOLDS UP

Erica: I did the graphics on the shop front, with Phil and the art department, and we were looking at either side [of the building]. There was an existing old hairdressing sign in the location, that actually looked right for the period. It really does exist. That's a real barber's shop in Bristol. It was a happy accident that we had some period graphics.
Seb: We got rid of the building [in the actual street], painted it out entirely and then built the street that we see behind it. We then rebuilt the hero shop in CG and added window panes and interiors in the rooms, even plasterboard and layers of bricks, all built in the way a house would be built, so we could then have complete control to animate it in the way we wanted.

So as we're animating the building folding in, you can see it's revealing all the layers of the building you would expect. We had to build a replica of the house, not just on the outside but on the inside. As the roof folds you actually see the timbers folding in, and then it all crunches in on itself.

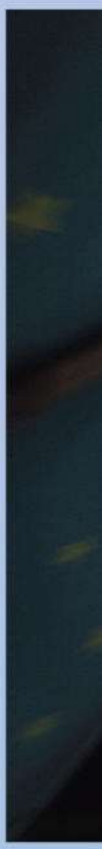
Film plate, 3D greyscale image and final comp.

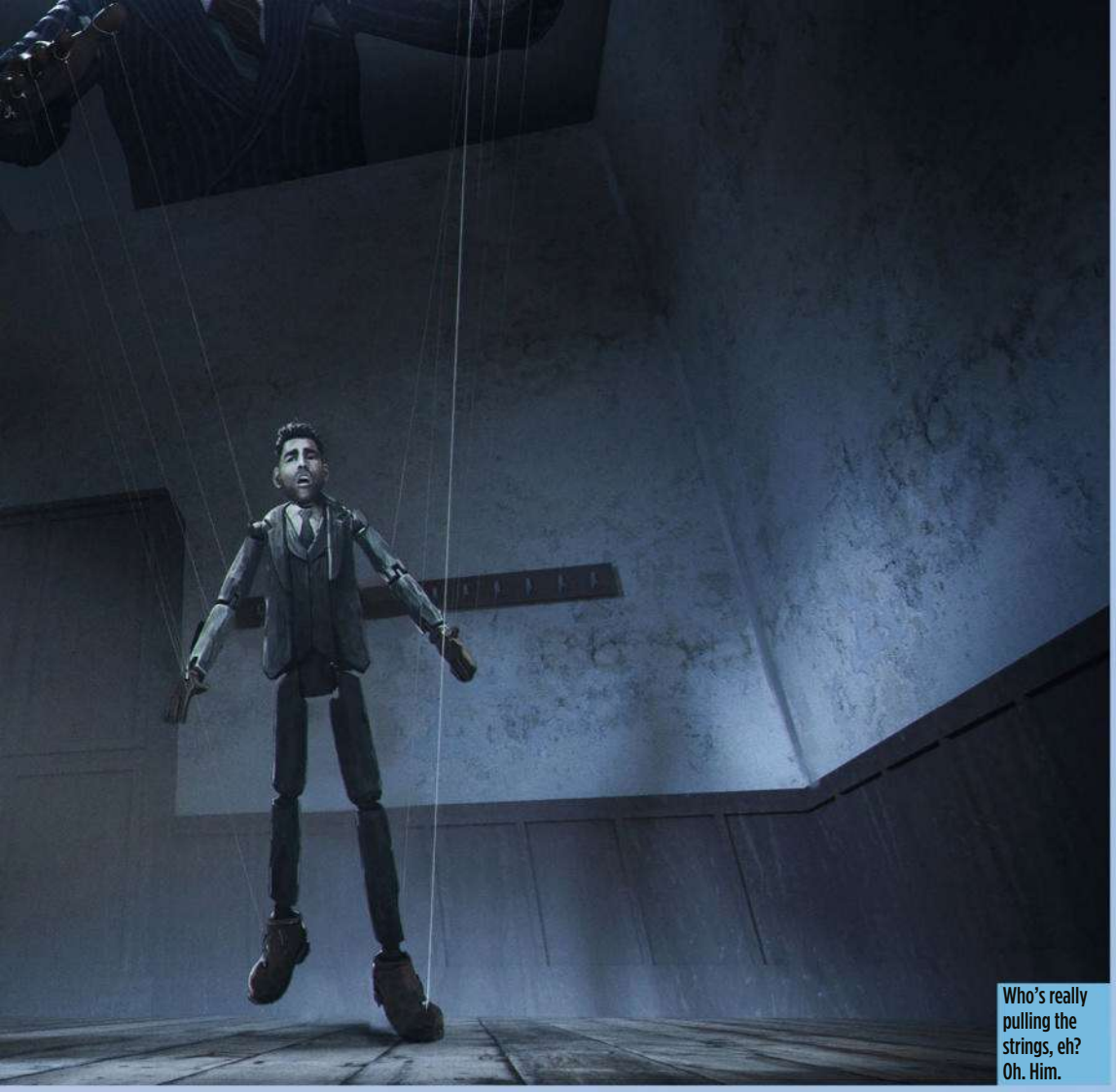
THE COLLAPSING CORRIDOR

Seb: Our CG supervisor Christian Bull oversees all of Automatik's CG creature builds and complex one-offs, including the folding theatre and toy shop in "The Giggle". Here the whole corridor ended up being CG. You see the whole room bending in the foreground. The only real thing is Donna and the Doctor.

A big part of this was simulating all the floorboards cracking and so on. When you're working with effects you're obviously constrained within the laws of physics, but you can cheat it and bend it to a certain degree. People that get too wound up by the physics can often lose sight of what looks good and what doesn't, because there's always an element of creative licence.

I'm always telling effects artists to increase gravity beyond what it is, or allow the surface tension of water to be slightly thicker than it would be in reality, or even the opposite. With a computer model you're never able to simulate all the possible factors that might have an effect on a thing that you're trying to generate. There's an element of creativity in trying to get things looking how you want.





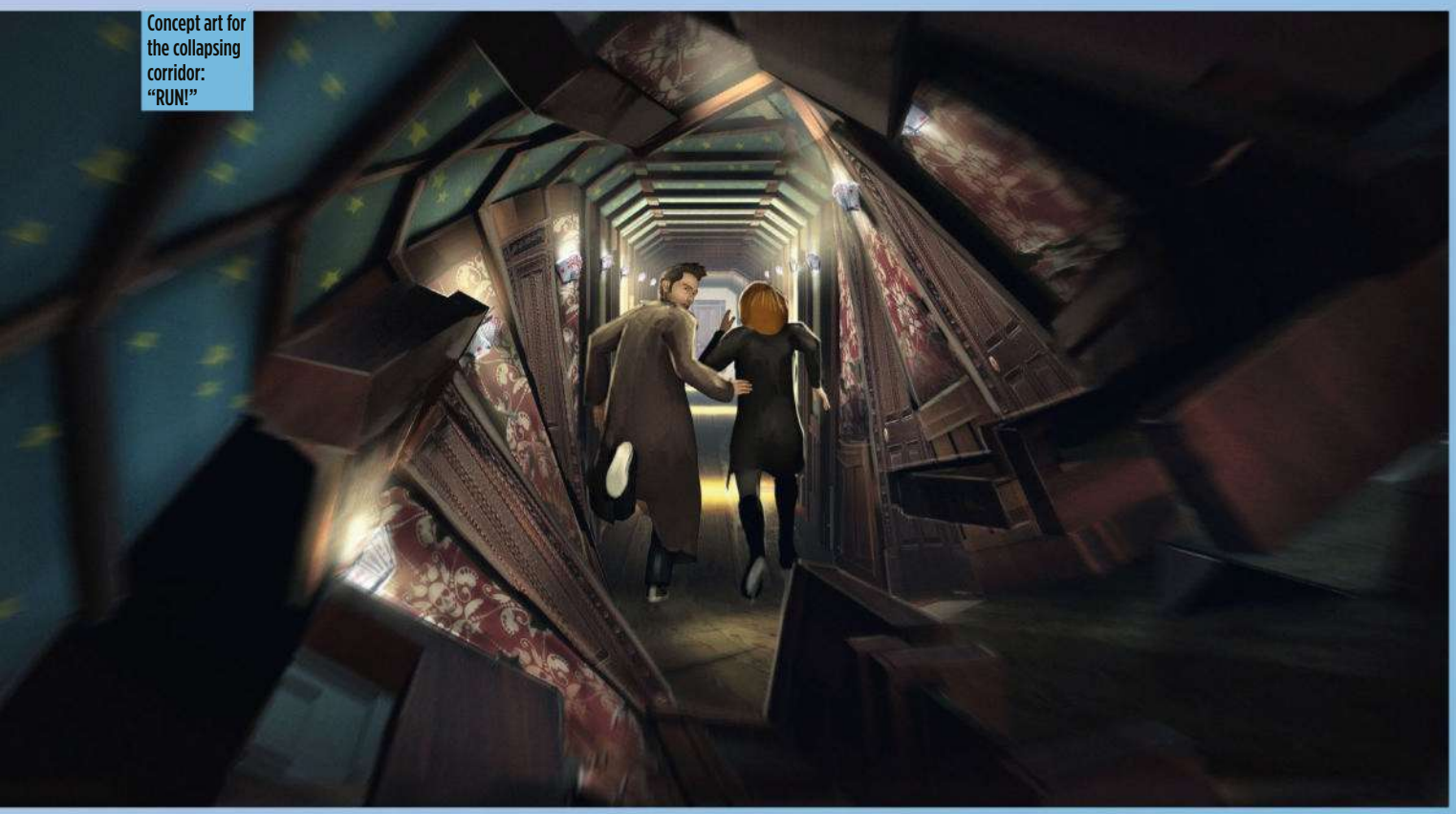
Who's really pulling the strings, eh? Oh. Him.

THE PUPPET OF CHARLES

Dan: This was probably the one we had to work on the most, in terms of solving it, in post as well. It was a head-scratcher all the way through. Our method worked, but we still had to do some tricky work in CG to pull it off.

Seb: If you take somebody's head and chop it off and put it on a puppet's body, it's always going to look like a floating head. It'll never look like it's physically connected to the puppet body. With the shots where we're behind him, we rationalised it by giving him a kind of physical wooden piece. So the shots from behind really sold it.

We could have gone for a much bigger rebuild of this character, so you'd end up with a sort of CG wooden version of him, but then it would have lost the essence of what Russell wanted to achieve, which was a human person stuck on a puppet body. If you made the head wooden, like Pinocchio, then it might end up not quite hitting that story beat. Good pre-vis really helped us on this. We shot multiple passes with a life-size puppet body and then the actor. It was an interesting challenge, but tricky.



Concept art for the collapsing corridor: "RUN!"

The King's got himself a bit wedged in the hull.

THE GOBLIN KING

Seb: Some people assumed it was full CG, but it wasn't. We mixed it up. There was a practical version that was on set [created by Neill Gorton and Millennium FX], which was amazing, but the lips and the eyes looked very much like they were controlled by servos rather than something that was gelatinous. The ears as well were generally quite rigid. So now there are all the wrinkles as the eyebrows go up, and we get the jiggles in the fat. We got away from that feeling of him being made of silicone. I'd say 30% of the shots are full CG, 30% are fully practical and then the remaining shots are a hybrid approach where we kept the animatronic mouth and just replaced the eyes and the ears.

There is an innately *Labyrinth* feel to it. It's not a realistic creature in the way you'd expect from something you might see in *The Witcher*. It's meant to have that charm to it, which is why the CG work that we did was about keeping the charm that made the animatronic really fun, but just adding enough nuance in the animation to make people think he could also be a real creature.

Nandor Moldovan, concept artist: The thought process behind the Goblin King was that he became the largest and heaviest goblin on the ship until the floorboards could no longer support him on the deck, leading him to settle in the hull of the ship, which became his throne room. The design of the king was influenced by the proportions and anatomy of the smaller goblins, featuring similar facial characteristics but with a massive and grotesque body that renders him immobile.

A shot of the final combined puppet/CG additions.

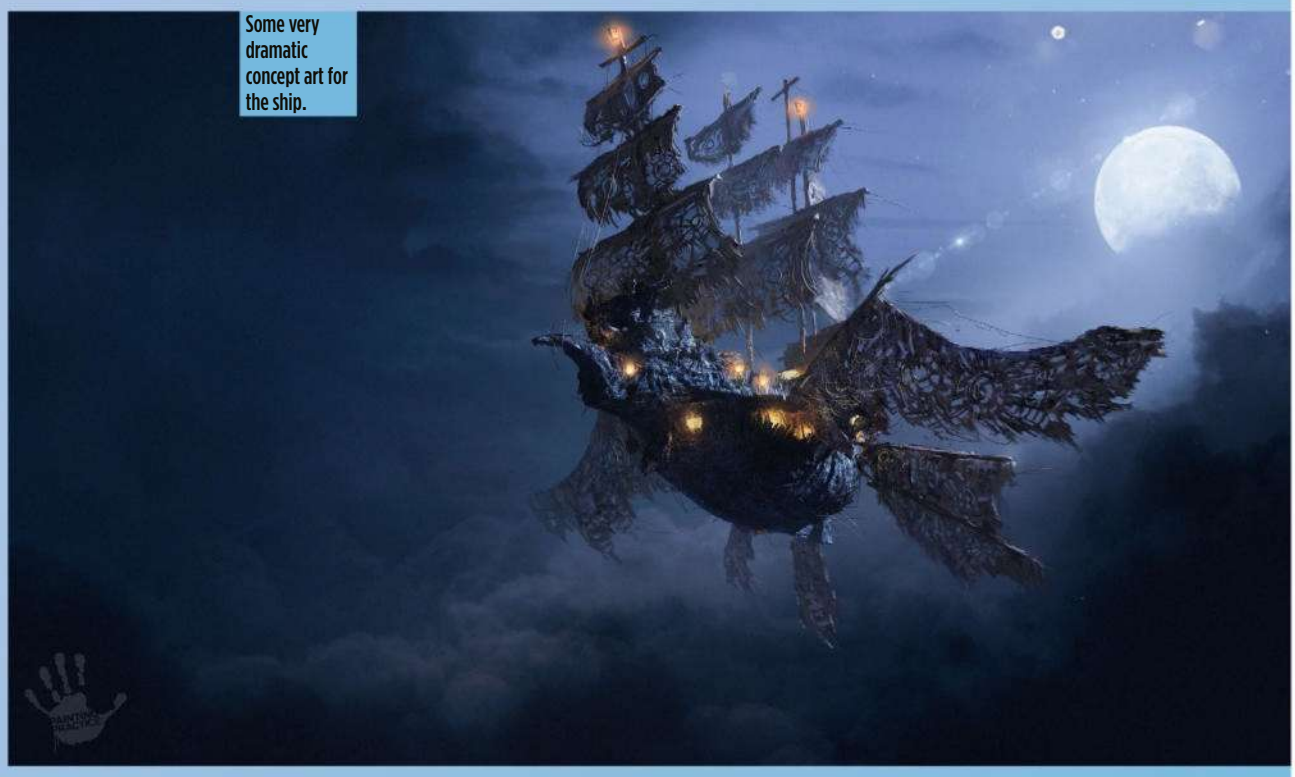
Final comp (right) and various 3D elements.

THE GOBLIN SHIP

Seb: It's powered on dreams. It's magical. It's not an airship, it's a ship, and it floats. It doesn't make sense but there it is!

Dan: In terms of the tone it was definitely fantasy. Even though the design was concepted – Painting Practice did the concept to show everyone what the final design was going to be – Val Hiblen, who's a model maker I went to college with, did some lovely maquettes in the model shop. So the actual design and shape of it was done with Phil and Val, the old-fashioned way, making a load of lovely models and maquettes. And then we started messing around with it in 3D, but ultimately this came from a more old-school approach.

The inside I just did in 3D, and I made a set design that was painted up. It didn't really change too much. Obviously it evolved and Kartik [Nagar] the art director and Phil did a very good job of turning it into a reality. All the detail and craftsmanship that went into it was massive.



Some very dramatic concept art for the ship.

Concept art for the Doctor's little song and dance.

THE GOBLIN BAND

Dan: Nandor did the concept art and did a lot of the work in 3D. It was a back and forth with Millennium FX as to what was going to be possible in terms of the masks, and we also had to work with costume and make-up.
Nandor: When designing the goblins, my focus was on how they would behave as a group. Therefore, in their character and physical appearance, I aimed to capture a childlike innocence that would make them likeable and comical characters before revealing their sinister nature as baby-eating goblins. The large expressive eyes, big heads, and potbellies give them a cute appearance, while the tiny horns on their heads suggest they may not be as innocent as they seem. Costumes also play a significant role in distinguishing each goblin as an individual character, despite their nearly identical bodies and faces.
Seb: The goblins are all acted by real people and they are in prosthetics. For crowd shots, where it's wide, we had a full CG version of the goblins as well, but they are mostly practical in the sequence, certainly every time you see them close-up. We basically replaced the head above the mouth in CG. It meant we could animate the flicks of the eyeballs and the way the ears let light through – it'd be quite hard to do that practically.

All the nuances of movement we added in but largely they are real, and physical, which was really important, I think. The motion is all the performer. Our animators are really complementing the performance of the actor that was there on the day.

Concept art: no babies (or goblins) were harmed.

The band get ready to do their big number.

Greenscreen footage and final comped image.

THE GOBLIN CHEFS

Dan: I think the machete was obviously too much!
Seb: Yeah, it just went full *Gremlins*! Maybe it was too dark, and the feeling was it needed to be toned back.
Dan: Obviously everyone reads the script in a slightly different way. That's why we do these big tone meetings, where we put the artwork up in front of everyone and the execs react to it. They loved it but they were like, "Oh, maybe we can't do that..." But that's the discussion. It's easier to do that with a picture like this.
Erica: It does steer everyone, every department. These images are up on the walls. We sit in the meetings surrounded by them and everyone starts absorbing the same visual language. It does pull everyone together, having these images available so early on in the process.

Doctor Who is on BBC iPlayer and Disney+.

CJ TUDOR

Chilling events: the horror writer tells us about Alaskan bloodsuckers

Words by Jonathan Wright /// Portrait by Bill Waters

IN THE ESTIMATION OF CJ TUDOR, SMALL TOWN Alaska is "weird and crazy", but "in a brilliant way". Tudor knows this first hand, because last May she visited Talkeetna, two and a half hours by car from Anchorage and home to 1,055 souls.

"Everywhere you looked there were antlers and bits of dead animals on the walls, a stuffed bear, and animal skulls in all the little bars," she says. "It was just brilliant."

One reason Tudor was so impressed by what she saw was because it tallied with an atmosphere-setting notion she had for the Alaska-set vampyr (to use Tudor's own spelling) novel she was working on, *The Gathering*: that people might display vampyr heads and skulls as trophies.

Central to the book is the notion that not only do humans coexist uneasily with vampyrs, but that the bloodsuckers have good reason to fear us. "They've been persecuted and hunted almost into extinction, even though they [mostly] haven't drunk human blood for centuries so they're not really a threat," says Tudor.

Nevertheless, vampyrs persist, such as those who reside close to Deadhart, a fictional settlement with a living population of 673 – reduced to 672 when a teenager is found dead, apparently the victim of a vampyr. Enter out-of-state specialist detective Barbara Atkins, who can authorise a cull of the local vampyr "Colony" if she thinks it's warranted.

Tudor loved writing Atkins, a character not so far removed from Frances McDormand's police chief Marge Gunderson in *Fargo* – albeit a Gunderson moving through a world that also recalls 2007 horror flick *30 Days Of Night*.

SMALL TOWN GIRL

Atkins is not "a stand-out kind of person". Rather, she's middle-aged, self-deprecating, short and stout, and not the best at chasing down suspects. But she's smart too. "She uses the fact that people underestimate her to find out what she wants to know," says Tudor.

Having been raised in a small town with its own Colony, Atkins immediately understands the social dynamics at play in Deadhart. "There's the sense that these people have got a tough existence," says Tudor. "They've had to deal with the Colony in the past and they feel they should be allowed to deal with the Colony in their own way [again] because that's how it's always been done."

It's easy, Tudor says, to "get into our own little gangs" and judge such attitudes as insular, but one of the reasons for writing the novel was to explore how we treat those we see as "other" whether they be townspeople or vampyrs, the latter of whom face prejudice and privations not so far removed from those faced by many indigenous peoples. "Genre can be a really interesting way to address social issues without, hopefully, coming across as lecturing."

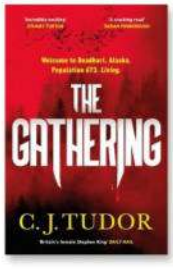
It's an approach in keeping with Tudor's career to date, as she anchors her work in the everyday. It's also work steeped in the genre; when she was younger, Tudor loved the work of Stephen King and James Herbert. In part, you'd guess, their books provided an escape. Growing up in Nottingham, she had "a horrible time" because of bullying. She mentions an eating disorder. "I was good academically, but the environment of school wasn't for me," she says.

BIODATA

From **Salisbury**

Greatest Hits
Since her debut *The Chalk Man* (2018), Tudor has written five more novels and a short story collection. *The Burning Girls* (2021) was adapted into a TV series starring Samantha Morton for Paramount+.

Random Fact
Tudor once had to ask Robert Downey Jr about getting fit for movie roles. He responded by lifting up his shirt and showing her his chest.



PRESENT IMPERFECT

Tudor didn't go to university. Instead, she got a job on a newspaper in Mansfield. She also worked in local radio and, in the '90s, landed a job as a presenter asking movie folk "quirky questions" for Channel 4 show *Moviewatch*.

Mostly it was fun, but not without the odd difficult moment, such as when she interviewed Tim Robbins, director of *Dead Man Walking*, a sombre death row drama co-starring his then partner Susan Sarandon. After a late-night screening, Tudor realised the questions she'd been assigned were inappropriate but, Stateside in a pre-digital comms age, was unable to reach her office.

Inexperienced, she asked the questions anyway, including one about Sarandon's breasts. Robbins was tolerant, "But I remember thinking, 'Oh my god, this is the worst experience of my life, I feel like such an idiot.' And the publicist would not give me the interview tapes." She's laughing as she tells the story.

Her real ambition was to write. In her twenties, though, she was busy having fun. In her thirties, she would begin projects with huge enthusiasm but "was a terrible finisher". Latterly, she started a dog-walking business to help make ends meet as she began to take her writing more seriously.

Then there was the thorny problem of genre. Tudor's first agent wanted her to write thrillers, but not ones featuring supernatural events. A new agent, though, encouraged her and a bidding war ensued for her debut *The Chalk Man*, an eerie tale of the past leaching into the present.

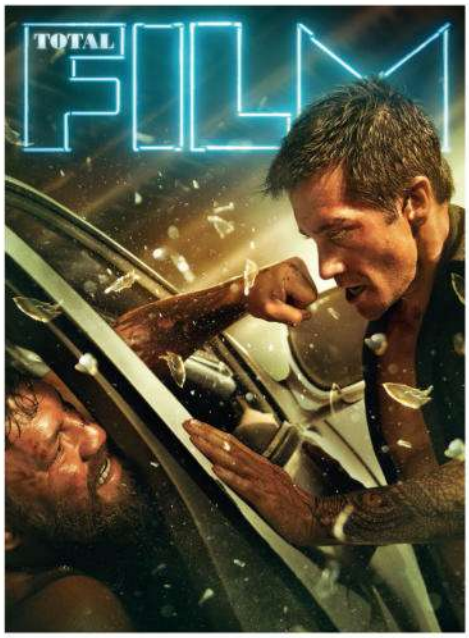
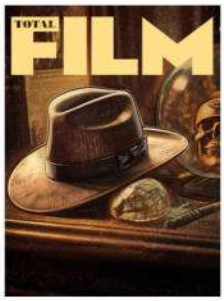
Tudor was on her way to where she was, perhaps, always supposed to be. As her English teacher Mr Webster once noted on an essay: "If you do not become Prime Minister, or a bestselling author, I will be very disappointed."

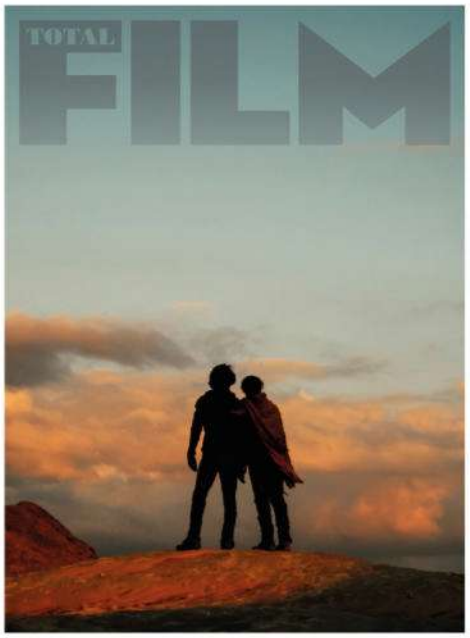
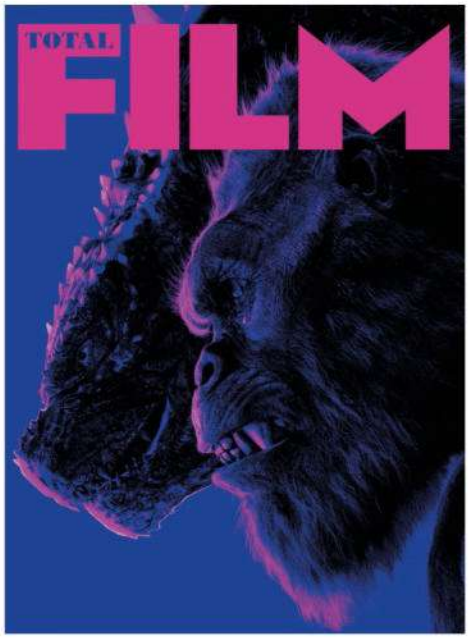
The Gathering is published by Michael Joseph on 11 April.

“I was good academically, but the environment of school wasn’t for me”

TOTAL FILM

3 ISSUES FOR £5!

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edited by Ian Berriman

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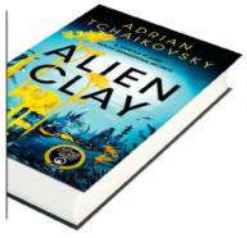

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"I can't look at you while that bogey is dangling."

DUNE: PART TWO

The Conqueror Worms

★★★★☆

RELEASED OUT NOW!

12A | 167 minutes

Director **Denis Villeneuve**

Cast **Timothée Chalamet, Zendaya, Rebecca Ferguson, Austin Butler, Javier Bardem, Stellan Skarsgård**

Thunderous, portentous and just a touch ponderous, Denis Villeneuve's follow-up to 2021's *Dune* delivers on the epic promise of that game-changing original while still leaving enough in the tank for a mooted Part Three. Broader in scale, grander in ambition and with even more international acting talent at its disposal, it's a triumph of technical craftsmanship that demands to be seen on the largest screen possible.

If all that humungous spectacle comes at the cost of rounded characterisations, crystal-clear storytelling and the occasional longueur, it's a price worth paying for a blockbuster stuffed with memorable images, jaw-dropping set-pieces and scenery-munching performances. It's also one that unapologetically embraces the knotty convolutions of Frank Herbert's seminal source material, a novel in which everyone seems to have more than one name and working out who's who can be as complex as 3D Sudoku.

Picking up exactly where *Dune* left off, *Part Two* begins with fugitive aristo Paul Atreides (Timothée Chalamet) and his pregnant, widowed mother Jessica (Rebecca Ferguson) hiding out on desert planet Arrakis with its indigenous Fremen people. The Fremen, led by Stilgar (Javier Bardem), have no love for their guests, with feisty warrior Chani (Zendaya) openly sceptical of their motives. Yet they have a common enemy in the rapacious Harkonnens, a foe Paul hopes to defeat by learning the Fremen's arcane ways and leading them into battle as the messiah that Stilgar believes him to be.

To do so he'll have to master worm-riding, a union of man and gargantuan invertebrate that provides the film's most thrilling

> **"A landmark achievement by any metric"**

and dizzying highpoint. As impressive as these mile-long, vagina-mawed beasties are, though, they're upstaged by Austin Butler as chief antagonist Feyd-Rautha: a chrome-domed, dagger-licking psychopath who gives the action a jolt of electricity whenever he appears.

Other additions to the cast do not fare so well, with Florence Pugh and Léa Seydoux particularly ill-served by their peripheral and rather inconsequential roles in the film's intricate galactic power play. Zendaya, however, effectively builds on what was essentially only a cameo last time out to emerge as both Chalamet's romantic foil and the movie's moral centre, one that becomes increasingly prominent the more burdened Paul becomes with vainglorious purpose.

It's quite a balancing act for Chalamet, required as he is to convince as both lover, soldier and potential emperor of the universe. Yet it's one he manages with a commanding aplomb that makes you curious what more he might accomplish were Villeneuve's saga to extend to a third instalment.

A landmark achievement by any metric, *Dune: Part Two* is a feast for the eyes that fills the most expansive of cinematic canvases. If David Lean had made a sci-fi film, it'd probably have looked something like this. **Neil Smith**

i Mick Jagger was down to play Feyd-Rautha in Alejandro Jodorowsky's never-made version of *Dune*.

LATE NIGHT WITH THE DEVIL

★★★★☆

RELEASED 22 MARCH
15 | 86 minutes
Directors **Cameron Cairne, Colin Cairne**
Cast **David Dastmalchian, Laura Gordon, Ian Bliss, Fayssal Bazzi**

Fans of the BBC's 1992 Halloween special *Ghostwatch* should appreciate this. Both productions nail the grammar of a televisual subgenre. And both descend into shiver-inducing supernatural chaos.

While *Ghostwatch* centred on a live broadcast from a house plagued by paranormal phenomena, Australian brothers Cameron and Colin Cairne's film is framed as a record of a late night US talk show broadcast on Halloween 1977. David Dastmalchian plays host Jack Delroy. His guests include a psychic, a sceptic and a girl allegedly possessed by a demon she calls "Mr Wriggles".

Every detail, from the corny gags about Jimmy Carter to the set design, feels authentic. Ingrid Torelli makes quite an impression as young Lilly – even creepier as she implacably stares down the camera than when doing a Linda Blair routine. There are alarmingly outré moments of body horror. It's also immaculately paced.

Our one quibble is with the use of "behind-the-scenes footage" shot during ad breaks. How anyone could film private conversations close-up (from multiple angles) is unclear. It's difficult to think of another way to achieve the same effect. Still, this failure to maintain the found-footage conceit does puncture the sense of non-fabricated reality. **Ian Berriman**

"That's it! I'll call myself... Madame Branch."

MADAME WEB

Mystic Meh

★★☆☆☆

RELEASED OUT NOW!
12A | 116 minutes
Director **SJ Clarkson**
Cast **Dakota Johnson, Sydney Sweeney, Isabela Merced, Tahar Rahim**

Either emboldened by the seemingly critic-proof success of the two *Venom* films or seeking a new cinematic low after the messy *Morbius*, Sony's Spider-Man-adjacent universe continues to waste its opportunities.

The idea of an origin story for an elderly blind psychic who spends most of her time in a life-support system always seemed a confounding topic for a studio that has struggled to exploit its grip on these corners of Spidey's world. And it proves to be fuel for an overwrought, forced and often unintentionally hilarious run-around.

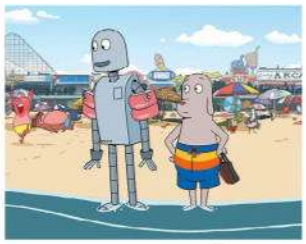
Many elements of *Madame Web* make you wonder whether the quality control department was on holiday. While SJ Clarkson has directed solid superhero entertainment before (see *Jessica Jones*), even she can't rescue a dreadful script set in 2003 that might as well be a film made back in the days before the MCU raised the bar.

Dakota Johnson doesn't so much phone in as text her performance as Cassandra "Cassie" Webb, a paramedic with some serious boundaries after growing up as a foster child following her mother's death in childbirth – a death that occurred while she was studying a mystical spider with healing properties in the Amazon.

An attempt to save her resulted Cassie gaining the ability to see into the future, which comes in handy when she's pressed into saving three teenagers (Sydney Sweeney, Isabela Merced and Celeste O'Connor, saddled with archetypes instead of characters), who are destined to become Spider-Powered people themselves, and are being hunted by Tahar Rahim's Ezekiel Sims.

Yet another poor outing from Sony, it's the sort of Marvel product that the wider cinematic community would be better off avoiding, even in our multiverse-obsessed times. **James White**

i Sweeney, Merced and O'Connor trained for hours in their suits, for scenes that make up roughly 30 seconds of the film.



ROBOT DREAMS

SFX Loves

★★★★★

RELEASED OUT NOW!
PG | 102 minutes
Director **Pablo Berger**
Cast **Ivan Labanda, Albert Trifol, Segarra Rafa Calvo, José García Tos**

Dog is lonely. He lives in a world peopled (er, if that's the right word) entirely by animals, which means that while a human would get a dog for companionship, Dog can't. So he's thrilled to come across an advertisement for a pet robot: a lanky, grey, Bender-style machine offering all the love Dog has been looking for. They're both blissfully happy until a trip to the beach goes wrong – and Dog has to leave Robot behind on the sand...

Adapted from Sarah Varon's 2007 graphic novel, this seemingly simple – yet surprisingly complex – cartoon is set in a vibrant '80s New York (look out for nods to everything from early hip-hop to Basquiat). And there's enough filmmaking bravado on display to have earned *Robot Dreams* its Oscar nomination for Best Animated Feature.

Lush, exquisitely detailed backgrounds bring New York to life, but they also contrast perfectly with the beautiful simplicity of Dog and Robot's minimal character design. Dream sequences add whimsy or menace, while music plays a huge part.

Most amazing of all, nobody speaks: the actors' voices provide nothing more than the odd grunt or chuckle. No words need to be spoken for you to fall in love with Dog and Robot. A match, and a film, made in Heaven. **Jayne Nelson**

"Look out, Richard Osman is on the warpath!"

DRINKING GAME

Knock back a beverage of your choice every time...

- A character smokes a cigarette – this show has extremely high nicotine content.
- Someone sees fiery orange numbers ominously counting down.

- Someone puts on a futuristic virtual reality headset.
- A famous scientist from history gets a namecheck.
- '60s environmental polemic *Silent Spring* appears on screen.

3 BODY PROBLEM

Weird Science

★★★★☆

UK/US **Netflix, streaming from 21 March**

Showrunners **David Benioff, DB Weiss, Alexander Woo**

Cast **Jovan Adepo, John Bradley, Rosalind Chao, Liam Cunningham, Eiza González, Jess Hong**

EPISODES 1.01-1.08 **Having spent the** best part of a decade in the Seven Kingdoms, *Game Of Thrones* showrunners David Benioff and DB Weiss shift their attention to another series of genre novels. This time inspiration comes from Chinese author Cixin Liu's *The Three-Body Problem*, and beyond some gory violence, the high concentration of British and Irish accents and a smattering of familiar faces, this sci-fi drama is light years from Westeros.

While the aliens in *3 Body Problem* don't necessarily have humanity's best interests at heart, their modus operandi borrows more from the cerebral ETs of *Arrival* than the demolition experts of *Independence Day*. This debut season is a talky, slow-build affair, somehow tied together by sophisticated virtual reality headsets, a sinister cult and the mysterious deaths of several leading scientists. The present-day story also links back to the Chinese Cultural Revolution, when a brilliant physicist makes a discovery with major ramifications for the future of our species.

The most unexpected thing about this adaptation (co-created by Americans Benioff, Weiss and *True Blood* vet Alexander Woo) is that it's so, well... British. Focused on a quintet of exceptional physics graduates known as the "Oxford Five", the show plays out like a sci-fi version of *This Life*, where the characters are scientists instead of lawyers, and the stakes are rather bigger than who slept with who last night. Mentions of Monster Munch, *The Antiques Roadshow* and mediocre English beaches feel like they've been lifted from a 9.00pm drama on BBC One, not a mega-budget Netflix show.

> **"There are shocks, big questions and bigger answers"**

That's not to say that *3 Body Problem* is small in any shape or form. When the show wants to show off its financial muscle it does so in spectacular style, with effects of movie-level scale and execution. Ambitious references to 10-dimensional space and advanced orbital mechanics (the eponymous three-body problem) make the science of *Oppenheimer* feel simplistic in comparison, as the story ventures into the sort of hard SF territory that usually gives Hollywood cold feet – it's refreshing to see a major streamer taking a punt on something so unashamedly intellectual.

Even so, the eight episodes of this debut season suggest that *3 Body Problem* is still finding its feet. When the alien visitation plot isn't front and centre, there's a tendency to overplay the melodrama, while the season finale has an undeniable whiff of anticlimax.

But viewed as the start of something bigger, the series' potential is truly huge. There are shocks, big questions, bigger answers, and by episode eight the cast – most notably Benedict Wong's not-cop Da Shi and Jovan Adepo's reluctant genius Saul Durand – have coalesced into an engaging ensemble. If Netflix persist with exploring this *3 Body Problem*, we'll be intrigued to see the solution. **Richard Edwards**

i This isn't the first TV adaptation. A 30-part Chinese version, *Three-Body*, debuted in 2023. It's available on Prime Video.

TWISTED METAL Season One

Couriers Of The Wasteland

★★★½☆

UK **Paramount+, streaming 21 March**
US **Peacock, streaming now**
Showrunner **Michael Jonathan Smith**
Cast **Anthony Mackie, Stephanie Beatriz, Joe Seanoa, Will Arnett**

EPISODES 1.01-1.10 **When we say that** *Twisted Metal* is a successful adaptation of the videogame it's based on, don't go expecting the next *Halo* or *The Last Of Us*. The game series is a largely plotless slice of pure action carmageddon, based around a near-future demolition derby where ordnance-stuffed vehicles blast the hell of each other.

So it's amazing they've managed to create a 10-part series out of that, let alone a half-decent one.

The gaming franchise had some twisted, dark, satirical ideas around the edges of its world-building, and the TV show takes that and runs with it. In a lawless post-apocalyptic USA, fast-talking amnesiac John Doe (Anthony Mackie) is a kind of gnarly UPS guy, making deliveries to various surviving groups. Then he takes on a cross-continent mission, which means navigating some of the most dangerous, psycho-weirdo-infested regions of the country.

"The crucial point is that they all have big guns and fast cars"

He's soon joined by the gloriously dour Quiet (*Brooklyn Nine-Nine*'s Stephanie Beatriz, the best thing in the show), with everyone from a murderous clown to a creepy priest and an ultra-right militia on their tail. The crucial point being that they all have big guns and fast cars.

It's silly. It's crude. It's as subtle as a kick in the groin. It's like *Blood Drive* (remember that?) take two – a show which was sent to the scrapheap too soon, so we're fine with that. It has a truck load of witty game-related Easter eggs, brilliantly oddball support characters and, most crucially of all, car-nage that – when it comes – is impressive, high-octane stuff for the small screen. **Dave Golder**

i In episode eight, "EV3L1N", the young John Doe is played by one of Anthony Mackie's four sons, Anthony Mackie Jr.

THE SECOND BEST HOSPITAL IN THE GALAXY Season One

Greys' Anatomy

★★★☆☆

UK/US **Prime Video, streaming now**
Showrunner **Cirocco Dunlap**
Cast **Stephanie Hsu, Keke Palmer, Natasha Lyonne, Kieran Culkin**

EPISODES 1.01-1.08 **If this is the** second best hospital in the galaxy then pray you never get admitted to the third. If you manage to make it out alive, you'll still likely be missing a limb, stuck in a time loop or impregnated with an alien egg.

Clearly there are good doctors operating here, but in *Russian Doll* writer Cirocco Dunlap's new animated comedy set in an alien hospital, the action spotlights Dr Sleech and Dr Klaw, two ambitious surgeons who seem to be at the centre of a maelstrom of medical disasters. As if the cases-of-the-week weren't bad enough – STDs that leave you looking like the last person you slept with, a skin-shedding alien that's actually a sex bomb – Klaw and Sleech are also involved in an unethical arc plot, researching a deadly anxiety-eating brain parasite.

There's lots of icky alien sex. Lots of bodily fluids. And lots of sci-fi medical dilemmas that make *Star Trek*'s sickbay-focused episodes look about as complex as a game of Operation. Amid the weirdness there's also a more serious attempt to explore mental health issues.

But while there's a lot to admire and enjoy here, something's not quite clicking. The characters are quirky but not especially endearing, and the show is hampered by a surfeit of everyonetalkingveryfast – something that plagues a lot of adult animated series (though Natasha Lyonne's role as a snarky nurse helps to slow things down). And while there are some great bizarre gags and (ahem) sick jokes, too often an elongated build-up climaxes in a damp squib punchline. **Dave Golder**

i Kieran Culkin's character Dr Plowp has four brothers, who are voiced by Christian, Macaulay, Shane and Rory Culkin.

AVATAR: THE LAST AIRBENDER

Getting the Aang of live-action

★★★★☆

- UK/US **Netflix, streaming now**
- Showrunner **Albert Kim**
- Cast **Gordon Cormier, Kiawentiio, Ian Ousley, Dallas Liu**

EPISODES 1.01-1.08 **Made by** Nickelodeon in the '00s, the original *Avatar: The Last Airbender* was an family TV cartoon with an epic serialised story – plus humour, imagination and great characters. Any remake of a beloved series faces a fanbase out to give it a kicking.

Moreover, *Airbender* has long been a byword for disastrous live-action adaptations, thanks to the atrocious 2010 film by M Night Shyamalan. Netflix's series covers the same material, being based on the first season of the cartoon.

Thankfully, their version is massively better than Shyalaman's. It's not as good as the original, but it's increasingly impressive and sometimes terrific. That's despite some very obvious problems, especially a weak first episode that drops a storytelling clanger.

The cartoon began with a great image. At its world's frozen South Pole, a young sister and brother, Katara and Sokka, witness a little boy glowing with terrible magic as he emerges from a huge iceberg. Everything else gets explained later. The Netflix show has half an hour of backstory first, losing an attention-grabbing opening.

"I've got 'I'm with stupid' tattooed on the back."

The boy, Aang, embodies the Avatar, an endlessly reincarnating being. In Aang's world, elements can be mastered by warriors, Jedi-style, but only the Avatar can use all four. An "Airbender", Aang can control the air to generate winds and shields, but he must travel to learn his other powers.

Unfortunately, Aang didn't want to be the Avatar and was running away when he was deep-frozen in a storm. In the intervening century, the hawkish Fire Nation wiped out hs people and is poised for world conquest.

Many viewers may give up on the series during the uninvolving first instalment, with its stodgy exposition and humourless characters, not to mention line deliveries crying out for ADR.

But then the show picks up. Part two has an electrifying battle involving a towering warrior goddess who could have stepped from a Hong Kong fantasy. Later there's a kaiju-sized owl. The youngsters lighten up, get funnier, and start bouncing off each other.

Gordon Cormier's Aang lacks the anarchy of the cartoon version, but has sweetness and fortitude. Ian Ousley's beaky-nosed Sokka goes from charmless to delightful as his character matures. Utkarsh Ambudkar is another stand-out as the mad king of a Minas Tirith-style stone city.

There are more storytelling gaffes along the way, but the finale is wondrous, full of flame-throwing ships and explosive duels, capped by a Godzilla-style monster made of water. So whether this *Airbender* continues or not, it's a rewarding watch.

Andrew Osmond

i A new *Airbender* graphic novel, *The Bounty Hunter And The Tea Brewer*, is due for release in May, from Dark Horse.

IWÁJÚ

★★★☆☆

- UK/US **Disney+, streaming now**
- Director **Olufikayo Adeola**
- Cast **Simisola Gbadamosi, Dayo Okeniyi, Femi Branch, Siji Soetan**

EPISODES 1.01-1.06 **There's some** dialogue you don't expect to hear in Disney cartoons. "The privileged only see beauty," a Nigerian boy says, "but they don't see the price that must be paid to make it happen." The girl he works for knows that he's talking about her. "I'm 10. I get subtext now."

This CG animation – whose six instalments run from 20-26 minutes – is a ground-breaking piece of work. It's Afrofuturist, set in the Nigerian city of Lagos, with flying cars, energy barriers and a lizard (possessed by the aforementioned girl) which has some very surprising powers.

But this is no Wakanda-style utopia – the story revolves around the rich/poor divide. The boy (Tola) and girl (Kole) are friends, but Tola's mum is sick and debt-ridden, so he's tempted to let Kole be kidnapped by the city's hulking crime boss...

The dialogue is smart, spoken in African accents with frequent slips into untranslated Nigerian Pidgin. The characters and conflicts are clear and interesting. The downside is that compared to the thrill of the complex world, the story ends up feeling very small. It's well animated but the spectacle is limited – and the super-lizard struts his stuff only briefly.

Still, this is a fascinating experiment, although viewers the same age as Tola may be too young to enjoy what it's doing – even if they *do* get subtext now...

Andrew Osmond

THE SIGNAL

Hello trouble

★★★☆☆

UK/US **Netflix, streaming now**

Directors **Sebastian Hilger, Philipp Leinemann**

Cast **Peri Baumeister, Florian David Fitz, Yuna Bennett, Hadi Khanjanpour**

EPISODES 1.01-1.04 **Honestly, you** wait ages for a sci-fi thriller about a female astronaut on the ISS, then two come along at once.

If you've seen another show which launched recently – Apple TV+'s *Constellation* – it takes a while to appreciate the distinctive qualities of this German series, because for a couple of episodes the déjà vu is overpowering.

A young daughter back home. A husband who's a teacher. Dual time frames. Ambiguity about whether what the heroine is experiencing is a hallucination. An eccentric who's been recording transmissions... the similarities keep piling up. The pain of separation is another overlapping theme – even more so here, after the plane bringing Paula (Peri Baumeister) home vanishes. The astronaut detected a signal from deep space: a voice saying "Hello". Something is on its way, and powerful forces are keen to avoid the disruption that could ensue.

Co-written by star Florian David Fitz (laidback hubby Sven), it's attractively shot, with plenty of lens flare, circling camerawork and some dreamily colourful flashbacks. Little Yuna Bennett steals the show as Charlie (deaf, but able to hear via a plug-in implant), her eyes so huge they resemble a CG effect.

"Becomes less convincing as it transitions from family tragedy"

The series becomes less convincing as it transitions from family tragedy into a conspiracy thriller where "Trust no one" is good advice. The ruthless plotters are amusingly bad at basics like holding someone until the intel they coughed up is confirmed correct, or checking that someone actually *was* shot in the head. And the whole business is predicated on the idea that this vast, overarching conspiracy is incapable of tracking an object approaching Earth. Still, the series finds its own identity in the end, and the final twist is a neat one – even if it is a crib from *Star Trek*...

Ian Berriman

"And this one is called 'Dancing On The Ceiling'"

i The working title for the series was *Hello*. Maybe someone realised that sounded dangerously like a Lionel Richie biodrama?

THE WAY

Family Misfortunes

★★★½☆

UK **BBC One, finished; streaming on iPlayer**

Director **Michael Sheen**

Cast **Steffan Rhodri, Sophie Melville, Callum Scott Howells, Mali Harries**

EPISODES 1.01-1.03 **Michael Sheen's** directorial debut is a strange brew. There are echoes here of '70s series like *The Changes*, and experimental dramas of the early '80s. *Years And Years* too.

The plot is easy to describe: when civil unrest erupts around Port Talbot's steelworks, Wales is sealed off, and a family go on the run after collectively becoming public enemy number one.

The tone is another matter. That synopsis may sound kitchen sink, and the Driscoll clan's bickering often gets soapy, but there's a weird mythological undertow too – a sense of ancient forces gathering – expressed in mythic imagery: an ancient sword; figures in monkish red robes. There are plenty of surreal touches, like a talking teddy bear. A riddling fool of a vagrant quotes WB Yeats. The troubled Owen (Callum Scott Howells) has dreams about a flooded village.

Heaped teaspoons of documentarian Adam Curtis are stirred into the mix too: archive footage of miners and the like. This is presumably meant to add allusive weight, a sense of layers of history, but mostly just distracts.

Sometimes, it feels like you're listening to Sheen delivering a stirring speech – like his one designed to gird the loins of the Welsh football team. Frequently, it feels absurd. Given the Troubles, we can't call it an impossibility, but the idea of a deep schism between England and Wales developing overnight is hard to swallow. A shogun-toting vigilante railing against "disease-riddled Welshies" feels like something from a *Two Ronnies* serial.

It's clearly *meant* to have a certain level of absurdity, mind – you could only devise the Welsh Catcher, a cigar-chomping mercenary who puts escapees in a cage, with tongue placed firmly in cheek. Ultimately, the journey fizzles out, with the authorities' prime target Owen deciding to head home again. A pointless exercise? No, because you come away glad that it's still possible to get such a strange kettle of fish to air; a drama willing to take risks and go its own way, unafraid of derision. **Ian Berriman**

"By the power of Grayskull! Always wanted to do that."

i David Cronenberg fans may find one music cue oddly familiar – it's "Hideout", a 1975 library track which was used in *Rabid*.

DRINKING GAME

Knock back a beverage of your choice every time...

- **Tom Baker scrupulously avoids eye contact with another actor in the scene.**
- **Everything stops as a trundling K-9 executes a 15-point turn on the studio floor.**

- **The Doctor offers a jelly baby. (Take two swigs if it's actually a liquorice allsort.)**
- **There's a punning allusion to the British tax system or ancient Greek legends.**
- **Bits of people vanish in a CSO haze during "Underworld".**
- **The Doctor's hat makes an increasingly rare appearance.**

DOCTOR WHO Season 15

Golden Grahams

★★★★☆ EXTRAS ★★★★★

RELEASED OUT NOW!

1977-1978 | 12 | Blu-ray

Producer **Graham Williams**

Cast **Tom Baker, Louise Jameson, John Leeson**

BLU-RAY DEBUT **In 1977, Tom** Baker's Time Lord was phasing between realities. Incoming producer Graham Williams had orders to remove the "sadism and violence" that had made previous seasons such full-blooded entertainments while winding up Mary Whitehouse.

As this latest *The Collection* box set proves, it took a while to turn around the timeship. Kill-crazed, fogbound opener "Horror Of Fang Rock" is strictly business as usual, while "Image Of The Fendahl" – also deliciously spooky – delivers a Nigel Kneale-inspired fusion of science and superstition. But the spirit of *Doctor Who* is clearly shifting. "The Invisible Enemy" introduces cute robot K-9 to a generation still counting the days to *Star Wars*, while "The Sun Makers" and "Underworld" offer by turns a witty, dystopian satire – hey, kids, taxes! – and a dreary cosmic riff on Greek mythology, undone by some ambitiously experimental effects.

By season finale "The Invasion Of Time", the budget is visibly wilting but the ideas remain huge – and Baker's in his full, magical pomp, the one last great weapon this breezier, slightly tattier show can muster against the encroaching George Lucas.

Extras Centrepiece of the set is a documentary on the life, career and untimely death of Graham Williams (97 minutes). Telling a hard, emotionally complex story with great sensitivity, it's a moving, illuminating tribute to one of the more elusive figures in *Who* history. A retrospective on the studiobound "Horror Of Fang Rock" is enhanced by a photogenic trip to a real-life lighthouse, where Louise Jameson (Leela) recalls a turbulent working relationship with Tom Baker (43 minutes).

Jameson's also in the spotlight for a first class interview with Matthew Sweet, giving thoughtful, engaged answers as the conversation ranges from fan mail to institutional sexism (73 minutes). There's a new interview with Baker, too, the seemingly off-the-wall questions inspired by the themes of season 15. This lateral approach winkles out some fresh tall tales, including insight into just how Dame Maggie Smith eats her chips (37 minutes). Baker's also on hand for some new audio commentaries, while each story receives a star-sprinkled "Behind The Sofa" watch-a-long (approx 30 minutes each).

We also get archival interviews with Jameson, John Leeson, Katy Manning and Sophie Aldred, including '80s and '90s convention appearances. Colour studio footage from "Underworld" shows cast and crew wrangling the effects challenges (48 minutes), while uncut takes of Baker recording video greetings for the *Doctor Who* exhibitions at Blackpool and Longleat capture the star in all his inventive, boggle-eyed glory (eight minutes).

You also get optional updated effects on "Fang Rock", two spoofs from *Emu's Broadcasting Company* (11 minutes), an impressive trailer that sees Jameson back as Leela, plus galleries, info text, PDF material and a host of old DVD bonuses. **Nick Setchfield**

i In the original outline, K-9 was named FIDO, which stood for Phenomenological Indication Data Observation unit.

NIGHTMARES IN A DAMAGED BRAIN

The Madness Of Killer George

★★★☆☆ EXTRAS ★★★★★

RELEASED OUT NOW!

1981 | 18 | Blu-ray (4K/standard)

Director **Romano Scavolini**

Cast **Baird Stafford, Sharon Smith, CJ Cooke, Mik Cribben**

BLU-RAY DEBUT **Notorious for its** "video nasty" status, this slasher also led to a UK distributor serving jail time after they failed to carry out BBFC-mandated cuts.

Mostly shot in Florida, it follows George (Baird Stafford), a schizophrenic released back into society. Supposedly cured, he's anything but. A string of murders follows – some startlingly abrupt – as this pathetic figure traverses a shabby, uniformly brown '70s landscape to his ex-wife's house.

There's not much to it beyond death and sex – the two meshing memorably in a flashback which weds bondage and decapitation. Shots of the camera cruising past the peepshows of 42nd Street also hold a sleazy fascination.

There's certainly some craft on display, though. The gore effects – prominently credited to Tom Savini, who in reality had a minor advisory role – are decent, and the editing is quite artful: jump cuts rendering scenes of George's car en route more ominous; flash cuts conveying how his primal trauma is bubbling up from the depths.

Extras A 72-minute doc explores the life of disgraced distributor David Hamilton-Grant, about whose name scurrilous accusations circle. Ultimately the trail goes cold, but the journey – which takes in '70s sex comedies, *The Goons* and Throbbing Gristle – is interesting. An epic 72-minute interview reveals director Romano Scavolini as articulate and erudite; you don't expect the man behind a nasty to discuss Kierkegaard!

Stafford and an effects guy provide further details in their commentary; a second sees producer William Hall grinding various axes. Intercutting old and new interviews, "Dreaming Up A Nightmare" (39 minutes) paints a picture of a seat-of-the-pants production. Savini also clarifies his role (seven minutes). Plus: a deleted scene; a comprehensive gallery; trailers. **Ian Berriman**

"And I, I-I-I-I-I-I, will always looove you..."

i To achieve the moments where George foams at the mouth, they simply popped an Alka Seltzer tablet in the actor's gob.

THE AMITYVILLE HORROR

Fright move

★★★½☆ EXTRAS ★★★★☆

RELEASED OUT NOW!

1979 | 15 | Blu-ray (4K/standard)/DVD

Director **Stuart Rosenberg**

Cast **James Brolin, Margot Kidder, Rod Steiger, Don Stroud**

BLU-RAY DEBUT **In 1979 *The*** *Amityville Horror* arrived in cinemas pre-loaded with its own legend: an allegedly true tale of a Long Island family compelled to flee a demonically infested fixer-upper.

If the passing decades have exposed the grifting BS behind that cultural phenomenon, then this new 4K remaster reveals a film that still has the power to unsettle, despite bland, TV-level visuals and a tendency to tip into schlock. For all the malevolent sash windows and Satanic plumbing on display, it's the image of the house itself that endures, gable windows glowing like the eyes of a Halloween pumpkin as it presides over an all-out assault on the American family unit.

Extras Two new audio commentaries provide a good mix of insights: movie historians Kim Newman and Sean Hogan are complemented by a more academic take from Josh Saco and Claire Donner; Dr Hans Holzer, the parapsychologist who investigated the original case, attempts to sift fact from Hollywood embellishment in a commentary included on a previous release.

A new and comprehensive feature on the filming locations returns to the parts of New Jersey that doubled for Long Island (22 minutes). There's an engaging set of interviews from 2017, including a personable Brolin (16 minutes) and former child star Meeno Peluce (16 minutes), along with screenwriter Sandor Stern, who confesses "It was not my favourite movie" (16 minutes), and legendary composer Lalo Schifrin (14 minutes) who reveals the "forbidden interval" at the heart of the score. A 2004 documentary (21 minutes) finds Kidder in fine, candid form. Plus: intro by Holzer; trailer; TV and radio spots; extensive stills gallery; poster; booklet. **Nick Setchfield**

"I've got a crucifix and I'm prepared to use it."

i 112 Ocean Avenue in Amityville, the site of the original case, is now 108 – renumbered in a bid to deter tourists.

MOVIESTORE / SHUTTERSTOCK

SPACEMAN

Lonely off-planet

★★★☆☆

RELEASED OUT NOW!

2024 | 15 | SVOD

Director **Johan Renck**

Cast **Adam Sandler, Carey Mulligan, Paul Dano, Kunal Nayyar**

NETFLIX **Johan Renck's** intergalactic odyssey is something of an oddity: a film that feels overly familiar despite its many unique ideas.

It follows Adam Sandler's Jakub Procházka, an astronaut sent across space to retrieve samples of dust from a mysterious purple cloud that has formed near Jupiter. Procházka is travelling solo and makes frequent calls back to Earth, mainly to promote the mission's many sponsors.

More than anything else, he wants to talk to his wife (Carey Mulligan) who, unbeknown to him, is seeking a divorce. As the impact of his isolation is felt, surprise: a giant spider (voiced by Paul Dano) appears before him.

Spaceman essentially plays like *A Christmas Carol* in space, though instead of spirits teaching our selfish hero a lesson, we have a talking arachnid with a strangely human mouth. Sandler is an empathetic lead, but we've been on this journey before, whether in *Ad Astra* (both concern daddy issues), *Black Mirror*'s "Beyond The Sea" (eerily similar production design) or even *Interstellar* (what's the point, if not for family?).

Still, *Spaceman* is a solid enough, well-directed entry in the lonely astronaut genre – though maybe not one for arachnophobes.

Jack Shepherd

i *Spaceman* is based on Jaroslav Kalfař's 2017 novel *Spaceman Of Bohemia* (Jakub is from the Czech region of Bohemia.)

CONCRETE UTOPIA

★★★☆☆

RELEASED 1 APRIL

2023 | 15 | Download

After an earthquake flattens everything else in sight, the 219 residents of a Korean apartment block face a post-apocalyptic scenario. Led by a demagogue, soon they're evicting outsiders – and calling them "cockroaches".

As analogies for jingoistic xenophobia go, it's not subtle, and there are various troubling questions. Why, months on, is there no international help? Why is the climate suddenly Arctic? Still, there's some good character work, and the effects should leave gourmands of disaster porn sated. **Ian Berriman**

YOU'LL NEVER FIND ME

★★★½☆

RELEASED 22 MARCH

2024 | TBC | SVOD

SHUDDER **2.00am, in the midst** of a storm: a young woman knocks on the door of a middle-aged loner's trailer park home. Can he be trusted? And why does she look familiar?

Featuring ominous sound design, a script with moments of gloomy poetry, and strong performances – particularly from Brendan Rock, by turns sympathetic and sinister – this twisty two-hander will keep you guessing, and has more style than your average thrifty chamber piece. **Ian Berriman**

FRANKENSTEIN LEGACY

★★★☆☆

RELEASED OUT NOW!

2024 | 15 | Download

From *Poor Things* to *Lisa Frankenstein*, Mary Shelley's modern Prometheus is having a cultural moment. This Brit indie offers a more trad take, a sideways sequel that sees Victor's journal fall into the hands of a woman determined to pursue his ungodly research.

The look is more Merchant Ivory than Hammer, and while short on scares it's sincerely played. Driven by a nuanced protagonist, it comes alive when leaning unashamedly into the gothic. **Nick Setchfield**

A MILLION DAYS

★★☆☆☆

RELEASED OUT NOW!

2024 | 15 | Download

It's 2041, and the night before a lunar colonisation ship is set to launch, the AI in control of the mission starts acting very strangely.

Set over one night, in one location, with a minimal cast, this low-budget SF mystery aims to be thought-provoking, atmospheric and edgy, but is actually very silly, melodramatic and predictable.

Some weird, late '60s/early '70s cerebral sci-fi film-style imagery (there's even a bargain bin *2001* stargate effect) raises the interest levels slightly, though. **Dave Golder**

LUCHA LIBRE

Ringing the changes

RELEASED 25 MARCH
1967/1968/1970 | 12/PG/18 | Blu-ray
Director **René Cardona**
Cast **Ariadne Welter, Maura Monti, Armando Silvestre**

BLU-RAY DEBUT **These three newly** restored rarities, all by the same director, showcase different ways the Mexican wrestling film could be hybridised with other genres.

The Panther Women ★★★½☆ foregrounds gothic horror, as female Satanists vow revenge on descendants of the druid who killed their cult's warlock founder. A Santo-alike called Angel helps out, but it's female wrestlers who are the focus. *Cat People* is in the mix too, as the cultists sprout comical fangs and claws – and spy-fi, via Angel's radio-watch!

The budget is threadbare (a coffin looks suspiciously plywood), but there's some attractively shadowy cinematography, and the cult – whose big hair and pencilled eyebrows recall classic soap opera matriarchs – are delightfully camp.

Shot in glorious Eastmancolor, lawyer-baiting hokum **The Bat Woman** ★★★☆☆ mashes up the *Batman* TV show with *Creature From The Black Lagoon*. Maura Monti's voluptuous crimefighter – resplendent in a costume considerably scantier than Adam West's – takes on a mad doctor who says things like "Resistance is futile!". His plan: using pineal fluid drained from wrestlers to create a remote-controlled fish-man.

You have to admire the sheer gall. The underwater photography is impressive, and the wrestling is mercifully minimal. But the endless rounds of capture and escape eventually grow tedious.

Western **Santo Vs The Riders Of Terror** ★★½☆☆ sees the silver-masked wrestler – a weirdly anachronistic presence – called in by a sheriff after six lepers escape from a hospital. An odd choice, as Santo's key skill is *holding people*, but then the real villains are hoodlums manipulating the lepers into carrying out robberies.

It's very by-the-book (the lead baddie wears a black hat), with the pizza-faced lepers adding a dash of horror – though nobly, Santo's sympathy for them never wavers.

Extras **The Panther Women** ★★★½☆ has two talking heads. One discusses the wrestlers who were stunt doubles (14 minutes). A second (24 minutes) addresses gender representation – expect phrases like "normative identity".

> **There's some attractively shadowy cinematography**

The Bat Woman ★★★★☆ has a new interview with star Maura Monti (18 minutes); a fascinating character, who later opened a cultural centre. Two talking heads place the film in its pop culture context (20 minutes) and explore Mexican precedents for its amphibian monster (14 minutes).

Riders Of Terror ★★★★☆ presents *Lepers And Sex*, an export cut which inserts six minutes of gratuitous softcore. In a 2009 interview (12 minutes), the lead recalls that Santo wore a half-mask to dine in the studio restaurant! There's also a general critical discussion (12 minutes), and a quick canter through the director's filmography (eight minutes).

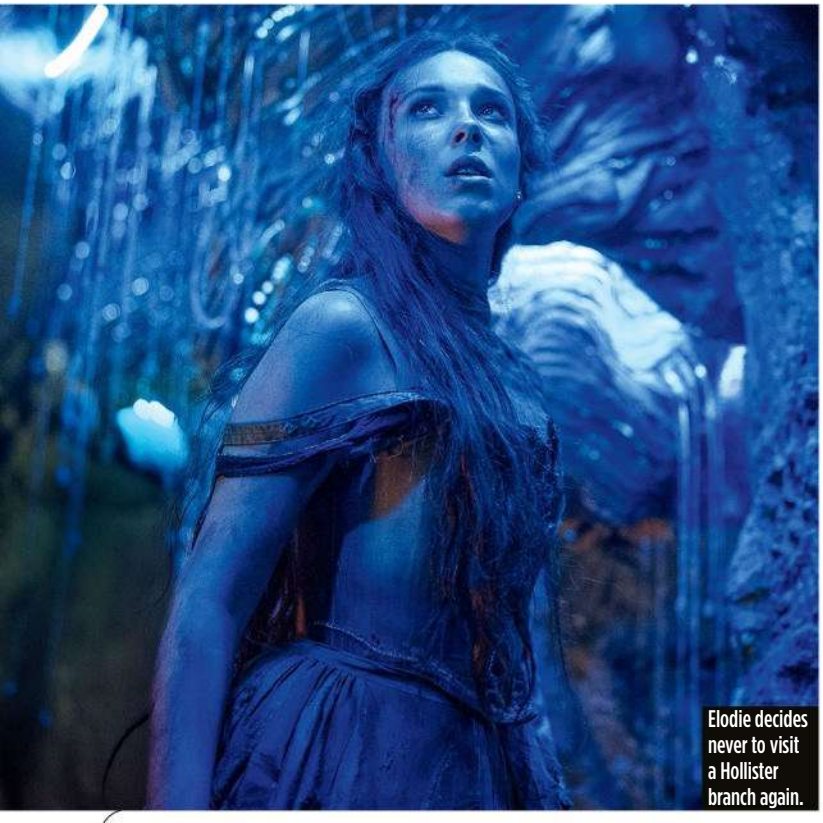
All three films come with expert commentaries, galleries, trailers, and 80-page booklets. **Ian Berriman**

Maura Monti nearly died twice filming *The Bat Woman*: once when a parachuting scene went wrong, once when diving.

(4K X FOUR)

OLD MOVIES NOW AVAILABLE ON UHD

After last year's 4K of the 162-minute theatrical cut, a new four-disc Collector's Edition of **AVATAR** (25 March) adds the Special Edition (171 minutes), and the Collector's Extended Cut (178 minutes). There are a few new bonuses too, like seven minutes of "RDA Promos" – actor Stephen Lang talking military tech, in-character. We said: "A magnificent technical achievement... but its beats are so predictable that it never goes anywhere surprising." In Brandon Cronenberg's **POSSESSOR** (out now), Andrea Riseborough's assassin uses brain-implant tech to inhabit the body of someone close to the mark. But the identity of her latest host fights back... We said: "Breathtakingly stylish and gasp-inducingly pitiless." New bonuses for Second Sight's swanky Limited Edition: a commentary, and director/producer/DoP interviews. In Hideo Nakata's 2002 film **DARK WATER** (out now), a divorced mother and her daughter move into an apartment with an ominous stain on the ceiling, and are haunted by a little lass in a yellow mac. We said: "Like *Repulsion*, it triumphs by creating an atmosphere of domesticated dread." Bonus-wise, it's the same as Arrow's old Blu-ray. The same goes for Lucio Fulci's 1980 horror **CITY OF THE LIVING DEAD** (25 March), set in a village where a priest's suicide opens a portal to Hell. We said: "Tremendously atmospheric, plus the gore set-pieces are jaw-dropping." (Highlight: when a woman pukes up her guts!) Comes with a fold-out poster and six lobby card reproductions.



Elodie decides never to visit a Hollister branch again.

DAMSEL

Unchained Elodie

★★★½☆

RELEASED **OUT NOW!**

2024 | 12 | SVOD

Director **Juan Carlos Fresnadillo**

Cast **Millie Bobby Brown, Angela Bassett, Ray Winstone Shohreh Aghdashloo**

NETFLIX **Dragons, eh? Always** lounging about inside mountains, threatening to burn nearby towns to a crisp unless they get a tasty tribute – which is where Elodie (Millie Bobby Brown) comes in.

Elodie's dad (Ray Winstone) needs gold to feed his starving kingdom, so he arranges to wed her off to the prince of a rich land. Bad idea! One moment Elodie is smiling at her new hubby; the next he's throwing her into a pit to appease the local murderous dragon. Such is life.

There's a twist to this glossy Netflix fairy tale, though, as Elodie goes from screaming victim to total badass. We follow her as she runs from dragonfire, wriggles through tunnels, cries a bit and eventually fights back... big time. Brown is on top form – even if her posh English accent wobbles at times – and the twists, while obvious from the outset, are satisfyingly delivered.

Most of the budget seems to have gone into the dragon, who looks great – although the CG is a little shonky elsewhere, it must be said.

But the film's masterstroke is casting *The Expanse*'s Shohreh Aghdashloo to provide its distinctive voice. She's as magnificent as the beast's impressive lava-like breath.

Meg Wilde

i A rock-climbing scene saw Brown getting bruised and battered after climbing "12 hours a day for many months".

PATRICK

Carrie On Nurse

★★★★☆ EXTRAS ★★★★☆

RELEASED **25 MARCH**

1978 | 15 | Blu-ray (4K/standard)

Director **Richard Franklin**

Cast **Susan Penhaligon, Robert Helpmann, Rod Mullinar, Bruce Barry**

BLU-RAY DEBUT **While the subject** matter – a man in a coma using psychokinetic powers to kill – cries out for histrionic treatment, this mid-Atlantic example of "Ozsploitation" is a little more restrained than you might expect.

You can put this down to director Richard Franklin being a devotee of Hitchcock. Mind you, the same is true of Brian DePalma, and while it's bookended by (literally) shocking moments, *Patrick* generally seems more low-key than *Carrie* or *The Fury*.

Susan Penhaligon is Kathie, a nurse whose interest in her patient results in "accidents" befalling her dual love interests. Kathie's rude wit and unflappable self-assurance are attractive qualities, but do rather undermine the sense of menace. On realising that Patrick tried to drown someone, she casually takes it in her stride.

The film could also be a little tighter – when Kathie's estranged hubby goes missing, do we really need to see her phoning around?

Still, it's a suspenseful thriller, boosted by excellent supporting characters: Julia Blake gives good Ratched as the frosty Matron, while one-time Child Catcher Robert Helpmann is a delight as the acerbic Dr Roget, turning in an arch performance worthy of Vincent Price or Ernest Thesiger.

> **"Excellent supporting characters"**

He could be in Oasis with a unibrowed stare like that.

Extras Choose between three cuts. The Australian release (112 minutes) is the primary one. Dario Argento fans will want to explore the Italian dub (102 minutes), which substitutes a synth-heavy score by prog-rockers Goblin. An abbreviated US cut (87 minutes) redubs all the cast! Madness.

A useful talking head by Aussie cinema expert Stephen Morgan (26 minutes) places the film in context. 2008 Ozsploitation doc *Not Quite Hollywood* is the source of five interviews (62 minutes) – Penhaligon is candid, describing one co-star as "always stoned". Further archival interviews (36 minutes) bring the tally of chats with the director or writer to five – so some ground is retrodden. The pair are also teamed on a 2002 commentary. Plus: French credits; trailers; TV spots; two galleries; booklet. **Ian Berriman**

i The director's first choice to play Kathy was Jenny Agutter, but she was unavailable; it was her who suggested Penhaligon.

CODE 8: PART II

★★☆☆☆

RELEASED OUT NOW!
2024 | 15 | SVOD
Director **Jeff Chan**
Cast **Robbie Amell, Stephen Amell, Sirena Gulamgaus, Altair Vincent**

NETFLIX **The Amell Bros** (Green Arrow and Firestorm from the Arrowverse) are back with more bargain bin *X-Men: Days Of Future Past*-style shenanigans. In a world where 4% of humans are superpowered (but a film where 99% of the characters are, making plot twists wearyingly predictable), the "powered" are subject to draconian laws and farmed for a drug extracted from their spinal cords.

Garrett (Stephen Amell) is now in charge of harvesting and distributing the drug. He's formed a dodgy pact with an ambitious LA cop, Sergeant Kingston – who's introduced robot police dogs to control the powered – to make sure that Kingston's K-9s turn a blind sensor to his shady business practices. But Kingston's attack dogs have a deadly secret, which Connor (Robbie Amell) discovers when he becomes guardian to a teenage powered with a rare ability.

While the first film was a better-than-you'd-expect micro-budget SF film, this is an exactly-what-you'd-expect sequel: relentlessly plot-led, with characters who act almost exclusively as exposition machines, fast-cut action designed to disguise basic fight choreography, and off-the-shelf CG effects. The Amell brothers bring some charm to it, but generally *Code 8: Part II* is competently made but woefully derivative. **Dave Golder**

This is exactly how *SFX*'s editor proofs pages.

BAD BIOLOGY

Getting their freak on

★★½☆☆ EXTRAS ★★★★☆

RELEASED OUT NOW!
2009 | 18 | Blu-ray
Director **Frank Henenlotter**
Cast **Charlee Danielson, Anthony Sneed, Jude Angelini, Eleonore Hendricks**

BLU-RAY DEBUT **A return (but** not to form) after a nearly two-decade absence for the director of *Basket Case* and *Brain Damage*, Frank Henenlotter's bad taste body horror about two sexual mutants wastes no time laying out its stall. The very first line sees photographer Jennifer (Charlee Danielson) declaring, "I was born with seven clits." In the third scene she shags a pick-up to death. In the fourth, she squeezes out a rapidly-gestated mutant baby.

Matching her in the "suboptimal Tinder date" stakes is Anthony Sneed's Batz, whose attempts to revive a flaccid phallus backfired; now it's a snake-like 30-incher with a mind of its own.

Best watched, if your home is semi-detached, with a finger hovering over the mute button, it is (thanks to funding by a rapper who roped in pals) tiresomely heavy with homie-speak, and the relentless barrage of sexualised provocation proves a turn-off. While on paper there may be something funny about a stop-motion cock worming its way along the floor, once it's battering through skirting boards to rape five women in succession, the target audience contracts to 14-year-old boys and hyuk-hyuking stoners.

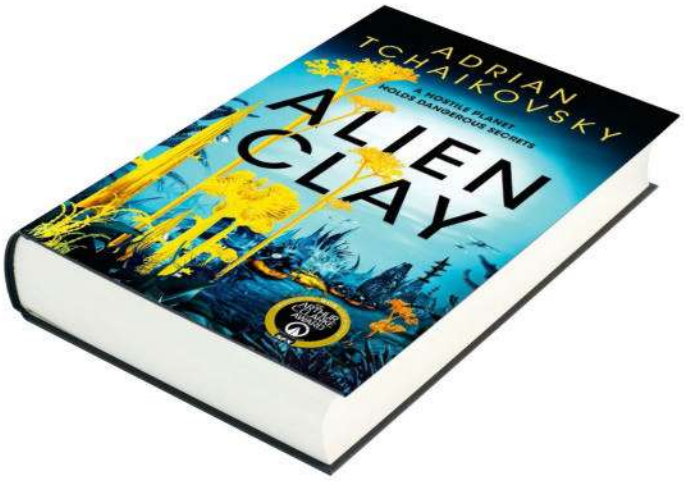
Extras A sofa-bound chat between Sneed and the DoP (67 minutes) is both illuminating and charming. Sneed also supplies an amusing short (2023, 12 minutes) about a guy who becomes obsessed with finger-sucking.

A half-hour Making Of focuses on whether the main location was haunted. Make-up effects guy Gabe Bartalos talks through the key gags (20 minutes). Behind-the-scenes footage (32 minutes) treats you to the director giving an actress detailed notes on her orgasm face... Plus: commentaries (one new, one old), both featuring Henenlotter; an eight-minute bit on shooting Jennifer's photos; music video; gallery. **Ian Berriman**

i The location used for Batz's house once belonged to Father Divine, a black preacher who claimed to be God.

ROUND UP

Biggest shiny disc debut this month: **AQUAMAN AND THE LOST KINGDOM** (4K/Blu-ray/DVD, out now). This last bow for the DCEU pits Jason Momoa's hero against Black Manta, who's scouring the oceans for ancient tech that will bestow the power of "dark magic". The cad! We said: "Occasionally summons a pleasingly old-school adventure film vibe... But even Momoa's outsized charisma can't save this underpowered swansong." Bonuses: eight featurettes (about an hour's worth). In **DREAM SCENARIO** (Blu-ray/DVD, out now), a professor (Nicolas Cage) becomes famous after he inexplicably turns up in people's dreams. We said: "A pin-sharp skewering of cancel culture... One of Cage's best roles in years." Bonuses: director's commentary; a 10-minute featurette; four deleted scenes. Fully deserving of its five BAFTAs, Yorgos Lanthimos's **POOR THINGS** (Blu-ray/DVD, 25 March) centres on a bravura performance by Emma Stone as a young Victorian woman brought to life through a brain transplant who, from, a standing start, discovers the joys of the adult world... We said: "One of the most fiercely inventive films you'll see this year." Extras: a 20-minute Making Of and three deleted scenes. Finally, Disney's animated musical **WISH** (4K/Blu-ray/DVD, 25 March) centres on a sorcerer king who tricks his subjects into having memories of their greatest desires sealed up. We said: "Perfectly charming... But at its core is a nebulous, insubstantial concept." Bonus highlights: a 64-minute doc, a short celebrating Disney's centennial, a deleted song.



ALIEN CLAY

SFX Loves

A View To A Kiln

★★★★★

RELEASED 28 MARCH
400 pages | Hardback/ebook/audiobook
Author **Adrian Tchaikovsky**
Publisher **Tor Books**

A major theme of *Alien Clay* is extraterrestrial evolution reshaping the familiar building blocks of life into something strange and new. The same could be said of this brilliant, gripping standalone novel, which reconstitutes numerous familiar SF tropes to create something thought-provoking, unexpected and at times unsettlingly weird.

In a distant future, academic turned dissident Arton Daghdev is sentenced to a one-way trip to Imno 27g (known colloquially as Kiln) by a totalitarian Earth government doing its best to stamp out free speech and "heterodox" thinking.

This so-called Mandate has grand designs on bending science to fit its narrow-minded ideology, even though the flora and fauna of this strange new world defy both classification and any attempt to tame them. The Mandate would also like to know who (or what) built the strange structures littered over the planet's surface. Ancient civilisations, corrupt future regimes and convicts forcibly relocated to hostile worlds are hardly radical ideas in SF. Nonetheless, Adrian Tchaikovsky – an author whose CV boasts fantasy, science fiction and an Arthur C Clarke Award-winning novel about sentient spiders – ensures you never feel like you're covering old ground.

The opening chapter alone is a masterclass in genre storytelling, a breakneck introduction in which Daghdev is rehydrated (think human Pot Noodle), arrives on Kiln by the skin of his teeth, and realises that several of his fellow prisoners have become "Acceptable Wastage" in transit.

The subsequent story is told from Daghdev's point of view, and he's a compelling focal point – not an unreliable narrator, perhaps, but not an entirely impartial one, either. He's idealistic, certainly, but constantly questions his motivations and moral courage as others on the base plot to overthrow the zealots of Kiln's ruling classes. He also talks like an actual human being, possesses a laugh-out-loud sense of humour, and – perhaps most importantly – brings a scientist's rigour to his descriptions of Kiln's bizarre ecosystem, even as extended time on the planet's surface begins to alter his perspective on life, the universe and, well, everything.

Not that it's particularly easy to visualise his alien encounters, seeing as natural selection on Kiln has come up with very different evolutionary solutions. Indeed, this (un)natural world is light years from the cosy, symmetrical norms of *Star Trek* and *Star Wars*, a biosphere inhabited by creatures with legs, mouths and other assorted appendages in all the wrong places.

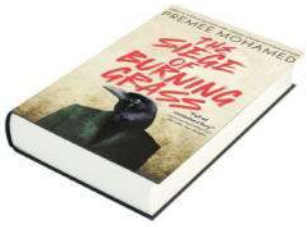
Self-confessed insect and arachnid enthusiast Tchaikovsky injects his narrative with intriguing real-life analogies – did you know starfish can turn their stomachs inside out to envelop their prey? – to keep things more-or-less relatable. But mostly he revels in Kiln's other-ness, leaving you feeling slightly discombobulated, yet eager to know more.

There are definite parallels with *Avatar*'s Pandora in the creation of a world where organisms exist in a carefully calibrated web of symbiosis. At the same time, it's hard to imagine anyone falling in love with Kiln's indigenous species, whose aggressive genetic code has an unfortunate tendency to attack outsiders on a cellular level – there's an undeniable body horror element to much of what unfolds here.

But *Alien Clay* also wonders whether the locals are genuinely the scariest thing about a world that's (nominally) ruled by an ideological commandant whose interest in intellectual pursuits can't mask his penchant for brutality. Subtexts and allegories are everywhere as Daghdev and other wannabe revolutionaries try to work out who can be trusted, and find themselves transformed by life on another planet.

It's a book that asks plenty of questions, and while it doesn't necessarily deliver the answers you were expecting, it's certainly food for the brain – or whatever freaky combination of cells does the job on Kiln. **Richard Edwards**

i Next from the prolific Tchaikovsky: robot servant tale *Service Model* in June, and enviro-horror *Saturation Point* in August.



THE SIEGE OF BURNING GRASS

★★★★½

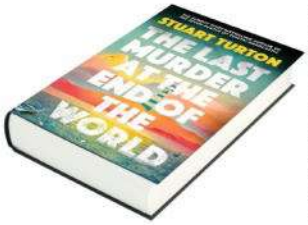
RELEASED OUT NOW!
432 pages | Hardback/ebook/
Author **Premee Mohamed**
Publisher **Solaris**

A lot of genre fiction boils down to Our Hero(es) versus an identifiable Big Bad. Stories where there isn't a villain with a face you can punch, where the problem is something abstract? Those are rarer.

Neighbouring states Varkal and Med'ariz are locked in a brutal war. Each side tells a different story of how the war began; each side publicly claims victory is inevitable; and each side is running out of bodies to throw at the war effort. Imprisoned Varkallian pacifist Alefret is offered a mission impossible: infiltrate one of Med'ariz's flying cities, and incite the anti-war resistance there to revolt.

It's a deal with the devil, and Premee Mohamed takes us on a deep dive into Alefret's hopes and doubts as he undertakes the dangerous journey with sadistic soldier Qhudur as escort. Does the chance to end the war justify working within the military machine? Is Alefret betraying the resistance by bringing Qhudur's violence to them? Which path prevents the most suffering?

Challenging and difficult in all the best ways, Mohamed's novel offers no easy answers. All intense interiority, regimes trapped by their own propaganda, and slow-build tension, it's like Franz Kafka or Ismail Kadare, except with bio-engineered medical wasps. Only a rushed ending keeps it from being perfect. **Nic Clarke**



THE LAST MURDER AT THE END OF THE WORLD

★★★★☆

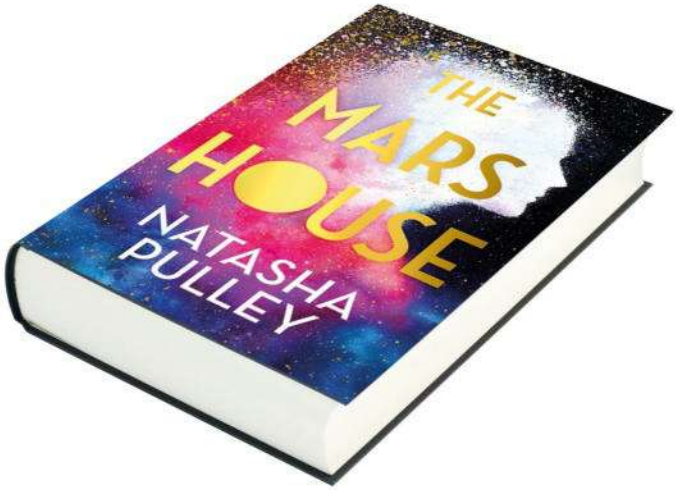
RELEASED 28 MARCH
352 pages | Hardback/ebook/audiobook
Author **Stuart Turton**
Publisher **Raven Books**

High-concept crime writer Stuart Turton goes for broke in *The Last Murder At The End Of The World*, a post-apocalyptic whodunnit that also delves into questions of intelligence and human nature.

There are only 125 people left alive on the planet: 122 villagers who dutifully maintain the Island, and three scientists who work to find a way to save humanity. But when one of these scientists, Niema, is murdered, Abi – the AI that protects the island from a deadly fog – lowers its shields. The only way to raise them again is for Emory, one of the villagers, to find the killer and coax a confession that will satisfy the AI.

It's a strange old plot, and one that requires quite a bit of world-building before the story proper begins. Once it does, however, the book really moves. The relationship between the scientists and the villagers is the first of several mysteries, and while seasoned SF-readers are unlikely to be shocked by the revelations about the true nature of this strange society, these answers still raise some intriguing ethical questions.

The novel is narrated by Abi and that adds a tension, as she is, if not quite an unreliable narrator, then an ambiguous one. A smart and suspenseful page-turner. **Will Salmon**



THE MARS HOUSE

Boy meets billionaire (on Mars)

★★½☆☆

RELEASED OUT NOW!
480 pages | Hardback/ebook/audiobook
Author **Natasha Pulley**
Publisher **Gollancz**

***The Mars House* arrives in UK** bookshops with a point to prove. The author took to Twitter last year after her regular publisher rejected the manuscript and her agent struggled to sell it elsewhere. A bidding war ensued, and now here it is. Does it live up to the fuss? Well, sort of.

Royal Opera ballet dancer January Stirling flees a flooded future London for Mars. Though partially terraformed, Mars is not a welcoming place. As well as facing extreme cold and low oxygen, "Earthstrong" newcomers must wear metal cages to offset their higher weight and strength compared with "Naturals", people who have been on Mars for generations and are genetically adapted to the low-gravity environment.

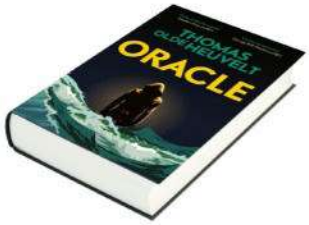
After a chance encounter with wealthy anti-Earthstrong politician Aubrey Gale goes wrong – January makes a joking death threat on live television, as you do – he's sentenced to prison. With his only options freezing to death (no one will give him a job after imprisonment) or undergoing "naturalisation" (life-shortening mutilation designed to assimilate Earthstrong into Natural society), January accepts Aubrey's offer of a political marriage.

Er, what? Fake marriages are a well-worn and much-loved romance trope: unlikely pairing forced together, growing and undeniable attraction, happily ever after, etc. But in this case, it's rather like being asked to root for a romance between Nigel Farage and a Syrian refugee.

Aubrey backs mandatory naturalisation of all Earthstrong, and plans to send ships of climate refugees back out into space. But the story sweeps all objections aside in a quest to make them a charming-but-fragile love interest.

The physical challenges of life on Mars are interestingly explored, and there are some excellent bits involving talking mammoths, but the parallels with the present overpower the story, the plotting hinges on selective stupidity in January, and the glib, cutesy tone sits uncomfortably with the grim themes. **Nic Clarke**

i Pulley will be signing in Bath, Edinburgh, Swansea, Liverpool and London this month. See natashapulley.co.uk/events.



ORACLE

★★★★☆

RELEASED OUT NOW!
384 pages | Hardback/ebook/audiobook
Author **Thomas Olde Heuvelt**
Publisher **Hodderscape**

Most of us probably don't think too much about the threat of rising sea levels. Sure, we're aware there's a problem, but it doesn't usually keep us up at night. This supernatural chiller by Dutch author Thomas Olde Heuvelt might change that.

The horror starts off feeling relatively contained, as a couple of 13-year-olds stumble across an ancient ship marooned, impossibly, in a tulip field. One of them goes inside... and doesn't come out. More teenagers, then parents and police follow her, and they don't come out either. Shadowy government agents try to hush things up, but only make things worse – in a way that might spell doom for the entire planet.

Though this is set in the same universe as Heuvelt's 2016 witchy horror *Hex* – a couple of key characters from that show up – it doesn't really matter if you haven't read it. *Oracle*, and its ever-escalating horrors, stands perfectly well alone. Heuvelt builds an entire nightmarish mythology (borrowing, with permission, a bit of mythological business from Neil Gaiman) without ever losing sight of how horrifying even a small chunk of body horror can be.

It's his attention to detail, as well as the thread of dark mischief that underscores the whole thing, that makes Heuvelt's writing so compelling. Who knew the weather forecast could be so spooky? **Sarah Dobbs**

SONG OF THE HUNTRESS

★★★★☆

RELEASED 21 MARCH

408 pages | Hardback/ebook/audiobook

Author **Lucy Holland**

Publisher **Tor**

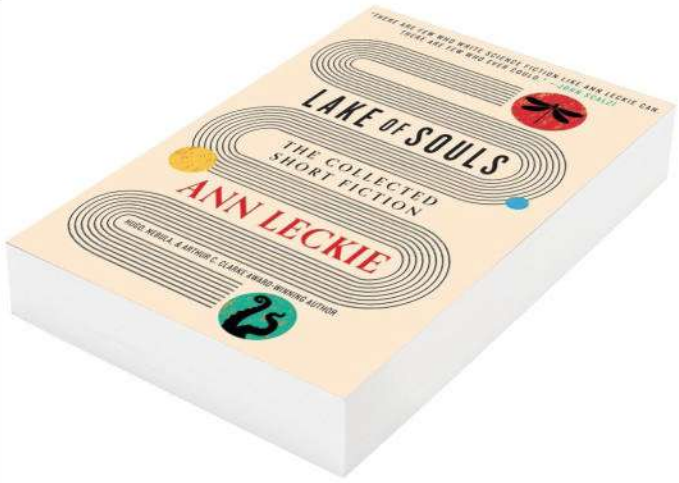
There are many books, both historical and fantasy, that deal with the famous kings of British history and mythology. Which isn't to say that women have been completely overlooked – Guinevere at least has never wanted for attention. But it's still heartening to see more tales focused on the other half of the human race.

Here, Lucy Holland (who presents feminist genre podcast *Breaking The Glass Slipper* under her real name, Lucy Hounsom) tackles historical couple Ine and Æthelberg, king and queen of Wessex in the early eighth century.

Battling rivals within the court, plus rebel Saxons and native Britons without, as well as dealing with the fractures in their childless marriage, they are attempting to keep their kingdom united when Herla, the female Lord of the Wild Hunt, enters their lives. And now they have an even more pressing problem – Gwyn ap Nudd, Lord of the Otherworld, is coming for them all...

This is an enthralling tale that feels a little too slow for a little too long, but makes up for it with powerful characters and immersive worldbuilding. Featuring sensitive exploration of relationships and sexualities against an action-filled story of battles, betrayals and magic, it's an impressive blend of British history, mythology and fantasy.

Rhian Drinkwater



LAKE OF SOULS

Say again...?

★★★★½

RELEASED 4 APRIL

448 pages | Paperback/ebook/audiobook

Author **Ann Leckie**

Publisher **Orbit**

Because her stories are so often full of characters with diverse and exotic identities, gender is often taken to be a defining theme in Ann Leckie's work. Yet when reading *Lake Of Souls*, her first collection of short fiction (named after a new novella), this quickly seems like a misreading.

Why? Principally because, time and time again here, there are moments where characters say one thing and, whatever they mean to say, find their words interpreted in a different way. Set aside gender for now, fascinating as it is within Leckie's work; the idea of communicating miscommunication runs far more deeply through her fiction.

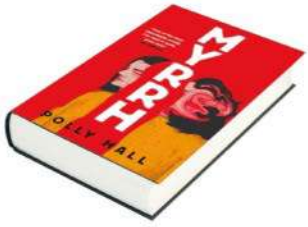
That's most immediately obvious in "Another Word For World", a study of colonialism that explores the role of translation in discourse: just how do people connect if translations are loaded with political and cultural assumptions? It's one of eight stories that make up the collection's opening section.

Revealing Leckie's range is the wry "Bury The Dead", a reflection on grief, mourning and the irritations caused by older relatives, in which a Thanksgiving celebration is complicated by grandpa being a zombie...

The second section is given over to a trio of stories from her Imperial Radch universe. "Night's Slow Poison", a tale of a space voyage that takes long, dreary months, moves at an appropriately stately pace before suddenly coming into sharp focus – a neat trick few other authors could execute. But perhaps surprisingly, given that Leckie's reputation is primarily as an SF writer, it's the seven stories set in her Raven Tower fantasy world that linger longest, as Leckie shows us a world where small and capricious gods move amongst people.

As in the oldest human stories, a recurring plot device is that miscommunicating with one of these trickster deities can have dire consequences. As for gender, it's front and centre in "The Snake's Wife", a tale of love and castration showing that, while the costs may be high, the gods can be bested. **Jonathan Wright**

i The audiobook of *Lake Of Souls* is read by Adjoa Andoh, who played Martha Jones's mum Francine in *Doctor Who*.



MYRRH

★★★★☆

RELEASED 9 APRIL

288 pages | Hardback/ebook

Author **Polly Hall**

Publisher **Titan Books**

Themes of motherhood, identity and obsession swirl throughout this atmospheric, fantasy-tinged literary thriller.

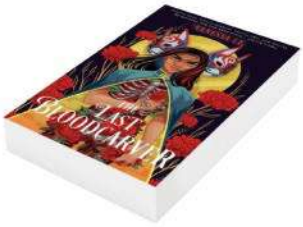
Myrrh has a good relationship with her mum and dad, but as she grows older she begins to long for a connection with the biological parents who put her up for adoption all those years ago. Getting in her way is Goblin – possibly a demonic force that's taken root in her body, more likely a manifestation of anxiety. Elsewhere, Cayenne is desperate for a child of her own, and will go to any lengths to get one.

The way these two women connect is at the heart of this enigmatic novel. For the most part the book bounces back and forth between their individual viewpoints, though a few others do occasionally interject as the shape of the mystery begins to slowly reveal itself.

"Slowly" is the key word here, however; Polly Hall's novel is big on interiority and thin on plot. She wants us to feel every moment of Myrrh's lonely confusion and every crack in Cayenne's mindframe before the book takes its late tilt into full-on horror.

That works to the benefit of the novel's ominous mood, but if you're looking for a more conventional thriller, look elsewhere, as this isn't that. Instead, it's a well-observed and empathetic look at two women in states of psychological distress.

Will Salmon



THE LAST BLOODCARVER

★★★★☆

RELEASED 21 MARCH

384 pages | **Paperback/ebook/audiobook**

Author **Vanessa Le**

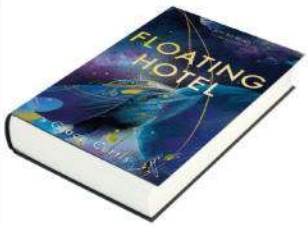
Publisher **Rock The Boat**

Nikha is able to heal people using the power of her mind. You'd think that this would make her some kind of exalted superhero, right? Held aloft by the public, treated with respect, showered with money. Well, if there's anything our real-life world has shown us recently, it's that society is filled with idiots. Instead of veneration, Nikha and her kind are persecuted – even dissected. And while they call themselves "heartsooths", everyone else, fearing that their touch can kill, calls them "bloodcarvers".

Debut YA writer Vanessa Le has spun an excellent tale here: the story of how Nikha finds herself secretly working for a rich family who want to find out if their father was murdered, who are relying on her to revive a witness to his death. Should she trust her new employers? Should she run away? Just how strong *are* her powers? And why does a doctor's assistant seem to know more about her than he should?

The intricacies of a heartsooth's psychic healing process are fascinating, as is the Vietnam-influenced world Le has built. The story does take a while to get to the romance (because of *course* there's a romance) and loses a little momentum when it does, but soon finds its feet again. A satisfying finale promises a gripping sequel, too.

Jayne Nelson



FLOATING HOTEL

★★★★☆

RELEASED 21 MARCH

304 pages | **Hardback/ebook/audiobook**

Author **Grace Curtis**

Publisher **Hodderscape**

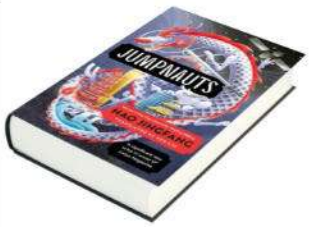
The blurb calls this "*The* *Grand Budapest Hotel* in space", which is both accurate (it's a hotel... in space) and inaccurate: Wes Anderson's patented tweeness is only present in short bursts.

The setting is the Grand Abeona, a deep space cruise liner which docks at a series of planets to offer a luxurious getaway for an array of rich clientele. The ship has definitely seen better days – its super-rich guests are now just, well, rich – but hotel manager Carl is content with his lot, working hard to please his customers, aided by a ragtag collection of employees who have become like family. Unfortunately, however, someone on board has been sending messages that threaten the galaxy's Emperor, and a witch-hunt is underway.

However, this overarching story is just a backdrop to what is essentially an anthology. The engineer, the new waitress, the swimming pool's lifeguard, the piano player in the lounge... all these and more get a chance to shine in their own sections.

Their stories range from amusing to heartfelt, crossing genres into spy thriller, romance and even *The X-Files*. Sure, the POV switcheroos are a little jarring at first, but once you're used to the character-hopping format you'll be sucked into the Abeona's world on a sweet, surprisingly sentimental journey across the Milky Way.

Jayne Nelson



JUMPNAUTS

★★★½☆

RELEASED OUT NOW!

368 pages | **Hardback/ebook**

Author **Hao Jingfang**

Publisher **AdAstra**

Chinese science fiction is having a high-profile moment in the sun right now, thanks to the new Netflix adaptation of Cixin Lui's first contact saga *The Three-Body Problem*. So it's an interesting time for Hugo Award-winning Chinese SF author Hao Jingfang's second novel to arrive, as it takes a *very* different approach to tackling contact with an alien race.

Jumpnauts explores a politically divided near-future, where Asian and Atlantic power blocs are at war, and a mysterious alien signal sets off a race against time. It's up to a trio of scientists to uncover its source, but what starts as a twisty first-contact thriller soon heads in a much weirder direction, rooted in Chinese history and mythology.

The book swiftly evolves into a wildly unpredictable blend of relationship drama and "*Ancient Aliens* meets *Rendezvous With Rama*" space adventure that's genuinely entertaining and inventive for its first half.

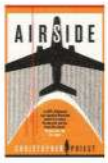
Sadly, it also doesn't know when to stop, spending much of its latter sections getting bogged down with abrupt tonal shifts, over-elaborate concepts and seemingly endless infodumps.

Translated by novelist Ken Liu, who also translated *The Three-Body Problem* into English, Jingfang's haphazard mythological romp is certainly not for everyone, but steer past the flaws and there's plenty of offbeat entertainment here for those willing to get on its idiosyncratic wavelength.

Saxon Bullock

REISSUES

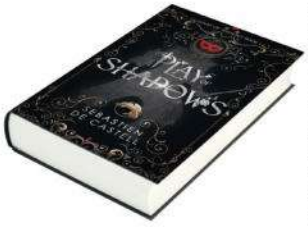
First up, a February release that slipped under our radar: **AIRSIDE** (★★★★★, out now, Gollancz) – sadly, the final



novel by Christopher Priest. It centres on the mystery of a Hollywood movie star who arrived in London in 1949 but then disappeared, seemingly without ever leaving the airport – an incident which continues to fascinate a modern-day critic. We said: "An intricate, clever, mysterious and moving slipstream novel... Written in crisp prose, as pared back and devoid of extraneous detail as you'll find in any noir." We also highly recommend fantasy **GODS OF THE WYRDWOOD** (★★★★★, out now, Orbit), the

opening entry in RJ Barker's Forsaken trilogy. The world-building here includes a landscape where bloated gasmaw creatures pull airships between crumbling spires, a forest which seems to have a consciousness, and warriors given superhuman powers by a fungal parasite. We said: "Will please fans of David Gemmell. But with its folk-horror vibe, it offers something distinct. This is *Avatar* meets *Dune* – on shrooms." Our final pick is Owen King's **THE CURATOR** (★★★★½, out now, Hodder & Stoughton). It's set in a Dickensian city where a

revolution has turned things upside down. Through the eyes of various characters (including Dora, caretaker of a dusty, abandoned museum), we see a fledgling regime floundering. We said: "A curious mixture of whimsy and grimdark... Never less than gripping."



PLAY OF SHADOWS

★★★½☆

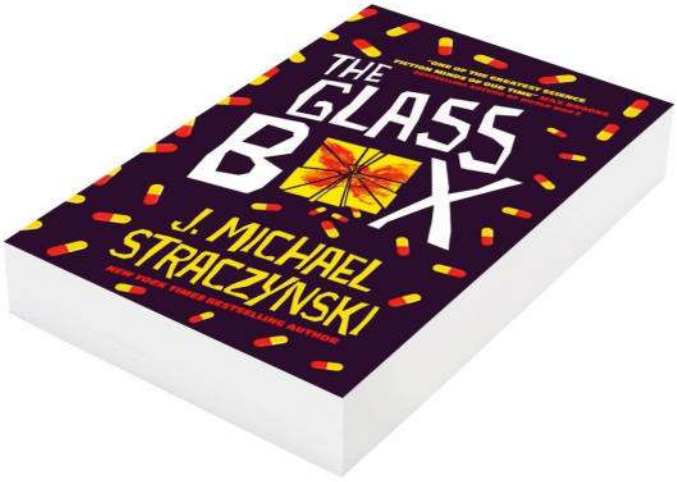
RELEASED 28 MARCH
482 pages | Hardback/ebook/audiobook
Author **Sebastien de Castell**
Publisher **Jo Fletcher Books**

Sebastien de Castell returns to the world of his Greatcoats series for this high-spirited tale of actors and intrigue. His hero is Damelas Chademantaigne, who discovers quite by accident that he may be a Veristor – a medium who channels the spirits of the dead when performing onstage. Unfortunately, the first time it happens, he unwittingly reveals a secret that those in power would prefer to remain hidden.

The backdrop seems modelled on feudal Italian city states, and the impressive worldbuilding helps enormously, as the plot hinges on the prominence of the arts in a society where songs and plays not only relive history but shape it. Damelas cuts a familiar figure; the sort of self-effacing hero currently in fashion with fantasy writers, he must vanquish his own insecurities before he can defeat the villains.

Some suspension of disbelief is required at the outset as de Castell awkwardly manoeuvres the hero into joining a theatre company called The Knights Of The Curtain, but thereafter the plot gains strength and momentum. The main antagonist, a duellist called the Vixen, feels a little remote – her vendetta is with Damelas's grandparents, he's just in the way – but this remains an energetic adventure buoyed by a vigorous pace and some intriguing ideas.

David West



THE GLASS BOX

The life of Riley

★★★½☆

RELEASED OUT NOW!
336 pages | Paperback/ebook
Author **J Michael Straczynski**
Publisher **Titan Books**

The idea of rebellion against overbearing authority runs through the work of J Michael Straczynski. For example, think of how *Babylon 5* is, in key respects, an argument for political autonomy and democracy. Big themes, but also ones that lend themselves to smaller stories, as *The Glass Box* proves.

Structurally, it's a relatively simple tale of the dystopian near-future. Riley Diaz is someone who thinks you should take a stand and, in a USA sliding towards authoritarianism, joins multiple demonstrations as a disciplined and peaceful protester. But when she's arrested, she lands not in jail but an American Renewal Center, a new kind of institution for those with psychiatric conditions.

There are distinct parallels here with Ken Kesey's novel (and subsequent film) *One Flew Over The Cuckoo's Nest* in the way Riley never stops resisting, even when she's isolated from other patients and, in effect, subjected to torture in a bid to break her. Despite her central role in events, Riley doesn't, in truth, demonstrate much character development. Then again, as Straczynski noted when talking to *SFX* last issue, her job is to be a bullet fired into the institution. It's the way she empowers others and encourages them not to give up that really matters in the end.

That's nowhere truer than in her relationship with a patient dubbed Frankenstein, a disturbed and frightening figure who was mistreated as a child. Despite being warned that he's dangerous, Riley befriends Frankenstein by reading him – what else? – Mary Shelley's novel.

Gradually, his battered and deeply hidden but still present humanity is revealed. It's a subplot that also plays out as a homage to the Universal monster flicks of the '30s and '40s – and does so while finding something of the pathos of the best of these films.

All that said, *The Glass Box* isn't a fancy novel. Though concerned with politics, it's essentially a thriller, one written with pace, an eye for telling details and an underlying quiet anger over the state of the world.

Jonathan Wright

i Straczynski has his own history of protest: against the Vietnam War and in favour of the Equal Rights Amendment.

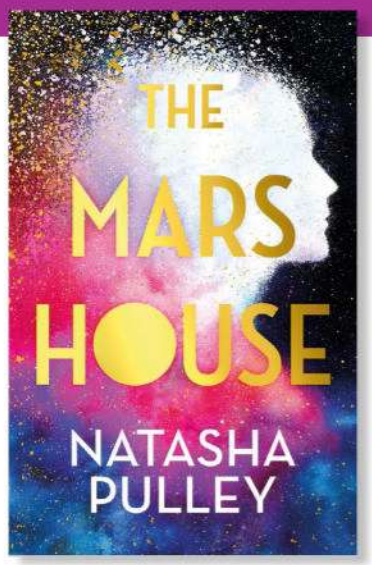
ALSO OUT

There's plenty more books that we couldn't fit in. In 2022, podcaster/Big Finish writer Tom Salinsky embarked on a mission to watch every *Star Trek* episode, from *TOS* to *Enterprise*. **STAR TREK: DISCOVERING THE TV SERIES** (30 March, White Owl) documents the first part of that marathon. Every episode gets a write-up, with a star rating (and he's quite hard pleased – 67 get two stars or less). Pitched as "for fans of Philip K Dick's *Ubik* and *Eternal Sunshine Of The Spotless Mind*", Nathan Tavares's **WELCOME TO FOREVER** (out now, Titan) focuses on a "memory editor" who wakes up in a Centre for Memory Reconstruction, told he's the victim of a terrorist bombing. Now he remembers nothing about his past – including his husband. After retelling the Medusa myth in 2021, Rosie Hewlett tackles another formidable female in **MEDEA** (21 March, Bantam): the sorceress who avenged her betrayal by husband Jason by killing their children. Bernardo Esquinca's short story collection **THE SECRET LIFE OF INSECTS** (28 March, Dead Ink) blends horror and noir as it explores the legacy of Mexico's blood-drenched history; expect devils, ghouls and old gods. Turning to continuing series: Peter V Brett's Nightfall Saga – set 15 years after the conclusion of his popular Demon Cycle – hits book two with **THE HIDDEN QUEEN** (out now, HarperCollins). Finally, Hadeer Elsbai follows up her Egyptian-inspired debut *The Daughters Of Izdihar* – centred on two women who can magically "weave" elements – with the second book in the duology, **THE WEAVERS OF ALAMAXA** (28 March, Orbit).

THE WRITE STUFF
THE SFX AUTHOR QUESTIONNAIRE

Natasha Pulley

She's turned from fantasy to sci-fi – will it be into an octopus next?



What is your daily writing routine like?

I'm best in the mornings, from about 7.00am to 10.00am. I used to be a night owl: no more! I don't know how that happened. The whole thing is very distressing.

Do you have any personal mementos on your desk?

No. I'm a joyless soulless drone – I could write in a cubicle office with nothing in it except dust and a dead houseplant. I don't need stuff in order to write, just a bit of background noise and access to some friendly humans once every 48 hours.

How do you deal with writers' block/the urge to procrastinate?

I don't normally get it. If I'm struggling with one piece of work, I usually write something else for a week or two and then go back to the other thing. Not necessarily with *fresh* eyes, but at least eyes that aren't upsettingly past their sell-by date.

Which of your books was the most difficult to write?

The Mars House was really difficult. I'd never done science fiction before, so research couldn't really shape it in the way you can rely on with historical fiction. The plot kept hurrying away from me whenever I thought I'd got a good grip on it. And I wasn't writing under contract, so I knew there was a possibility I'd finish it and never be able to sell it, just like a debut novel.

Have you ever come up with a good plot idea in a dream?

Never good plot ideas, because those usually need a good dose of logic; I'm not so great at that when I'm asleep. But definitely individual scenes or images. The whole of *The Kingdoms* is based around the image of a man waiting for someone on a pebble shore, and that came from a recurring dream.

Were you a keen reader when you were a child?

Super keen! I grew up on Terry Pratchett and Neil Gaiman and Ursula Le Guin, and even now, if I'm in a bit of a moral knot, the best way out is normally to ask what Granny Weatherwax would do.

Which SF/fantasy book published in the last year has most impressed you?

Prophet, by Helen Macdonald and Sin Blaché. I loved the idea of an American diner just popping into being one morning in a field in England. The ending really annoyed me, which is brilliant, because being annoyed is helpful: then you go away and you write something in response, and the whole point of literature is that books talk to other books.

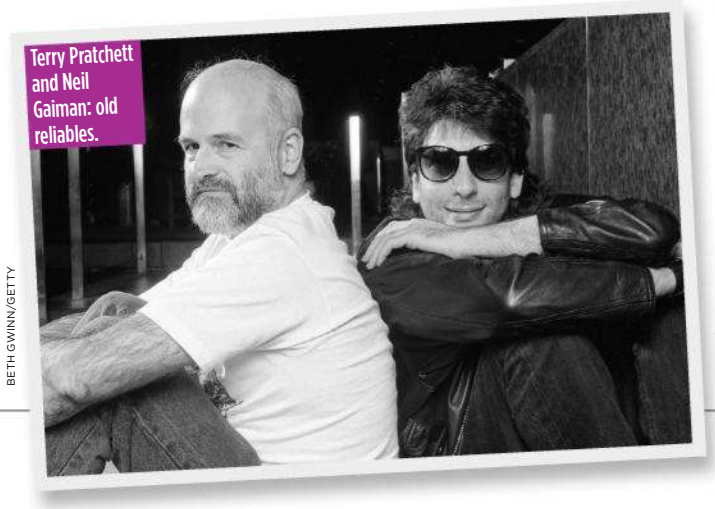
What's the best gift you've received from a reader?

Someone gave me a red velvet sock puppet octopus recently, and I've been feeling a very strong urge to start doing book reviews on TikTok as the Velvet Octopus.

What's the most frustrating thing about being an author?

You have no control over whether your book is going to do well. You could write the best book you've ever written, but if the publisher doesn't push it, it will go under without a ripple. Or you could write one you genuinely feel is a bit rubbish, but for one reason or 12, the publisher will really get behind it, and it will end up on the bestseller list. It's like being a gambler: all you do is keep throwing the dice.

The Mars House is out now, published by Gollancz.


Terry Pratchett and Neil Gaiman: old reliables.

BETH GWINN/GETTY

BATMAN: CITY OF MADNESS

The Tentacled Knight

★★½☆☆

RELEASED **OUT NOW!**
Publisher **DC/Black Label**
Writer/Artist **Christian Ward**

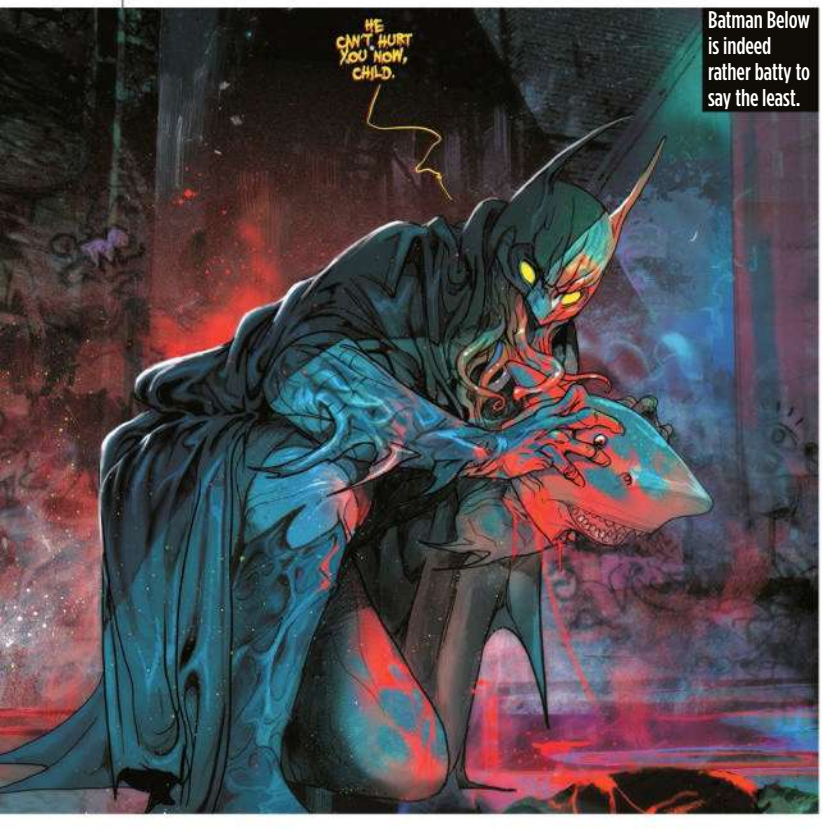
ISSUES 1-3 **The question of** wherabouts Batman sits on the sanity spectrum has been hotly debated in comics since the '80s, and the latest series to dig deep into Bruce Wayne's psyche is this three-issue miniseries by Christian Ward.

It has an intriguing set-up, with Batman being informed by sinister organisation the Court of Owls that there's an otherworldly secret underneath Gotham – a twisted mirror-image of the city called Gotham Below.

The barrier between the two worlds has been pierced, meaning that the terrifying Batman Below has crossed over and pulled an orphaned child into his bizarre realm, aiming to corrupt a boy who's desperate for vengeance into a nightmare version of Robin. It's up to Batman to voyage into Gotham Below and stop this.

While there are evocative and potentially lurid ideas at play here, *City Of Madness* rarely lives up to its attention-grabbing narrative hook. There are no weaknesses on the visual side – Ward is one of the more distinctive comic-book artists at work today, and his wild approach to style and colour is in full effect here, helped by the oversized pages of Black Label's "Prestige" format. There are inventive layouts and stunning double-page spreads, but the boldly experimental art doesn't always complement the more routine story elements.

Ward is clearly aiming for a sense of cosmic horror (his gorgeous, tentacle-heavy design for the Batman Below is obviously influenced by HP Lovecraft), but *City Of Madness* never quite pulls it off. Instead of atmospheric dread, we get an over-familiar (and slightly overwritten) tale of Batman facing off against a "dark mirror" of himself, and way too much pondering on the nature of madness and trauma.



Batman Below is indeed rather batty to say the least.

> **"Rarely lives up to its narrative hook"**

The series also takes a bizarrely long time – two whole issues – for Batman to even *arrive* in Gotham Below, and it's ultimately a little underwhelming when we finally do get there. There are also a bunch of references and connections to the Grant Morrison/Dave McKean classic *Arkham Asylum*, most of which don't do *City Of Madness* any favours in the comparison.

The story does deliver some strong, emotionally compelling moments, but also veers into standard *Batman* narrative tropes. *City Of Madness* only occasionally embraces the inherent weirdness of its premise, and its visually dazzling elements aren't enough to balance the more frustrating storytelling moments.

Saxon Bullock

ℹ Ward got to pitch the story for *City* thanks to his images of the Batman Below attracting attention on Twitter.

BATMAN: "THE JOKER: YEAR ONE"

★★★☆☆

RELEASED **OUT NOW!**
Publisher **DC Comics**
Writer **Chip Zdarsky**
Artists **Andrea Sorrentino, Giuseppe Camuncoli**

ISSUES 142-144 **The question of** where the Joker came from has haunted comics for decades. Alan Moore and Brian Bolland's *The Killing Joke* gave us a convincing origin, but made a point of suggesting that the Clown Prince of Crime's history is deliberately "multiple choice". He's an elemental force of nature and how he became that way is beside the point.

"The Joker: Year Zero" – a three-issue arc which ran throughout the core *Batman* comic in February – grafts some new information onto this story. Split between the past and a possible future, it tells the story of the Joker's early days. It doesn't reinvent the character, but it does add some hitherto unknown links between Bruce Wayne and his arch-enemy. They feel oddly irrelevant, though – we gain no deeper insight into either character.

The art, at least, is strong, split between two time periods and two creators. Giuseppe Camuncoli handles the past sections, his pencils clean and detailed, though having him recreate Bolland's Joker laughing panel – up there with the most iconic moments in all of comics – was unwise. *Gideon Falls* artist Andrea Sorrentino, however, excels in making the future Gotham scenes truly nightmarish and evocative.

It's a decent arc, just one that doesn't have a compelling reason to exist. **Will Salmon**

SECRET WARS: BATTLEWORLD

★★★☆☆

- RELEASED **OUT NOW!**
- Publisher **Marvel Comics**
- Writer **Tom DeFalco**
- Artist **Pat Olliffe**

ISSUES 1-4 **The latest in Marvel's** line of retro series which take place within the continuity of popular past storylines, the nostalgic redundancy of this four-parter is inherent to its premise; its events occur entirely between the panels of a single page of 1985's *Secret Wars* 12, meaning that nothing of true significance can occur.

Having edited the original series, Tom DeFalco emulates his predecessor Jim Shooter's bombastic scripting style; the main protagonists frequently launch into expositional monologues, and in timeless Marvel fashion initially come to blows before joining forces against their adversaries.

While *Secret Wars* paved the way for today's crossovers by pitting a multitude of heroes and villains against each other, *Battleworld* focuses mostly on Spider-Man, while support is provided by the Human Torch and folk such as Daredevil, Iceman and the Falcon.

With Spidey sporting his symbiotic alien black costume for the first time, the biggest revelation involves its future evolution into Venom, while some intriguing hints are also dropped about the Falcon's future as Captain America.

Channelling the dynamism of original penciller Mike Zeck, Pat Olliffe's impressive art brings to mind Sal Buscema or Ron Frenz's neat linework. An inconsequential but engaging trip back in time. **Stephen Jewell**

IT'S SO LIGHT NEVER SHINES ON THEIR CRIMES, SO YOU NEVER SEE THE HELPLESS PEOPLE WHO SUFFER IN ORDER FOR YOU TO THRIVE.
THAT'S NOT WHO WE ARE.
WE'RE AMERICANS. WE LOOK OUT FOR PEOPLE. WE DON'T TURN OUR BACKS.

From super soldier to above-average orator.

AVENGERS: TWILIGHT

Fight The Powers

★★★☆☆

- RELEASED **OUT NOW!**
- Publisher **Marvel Comics**
- Writer **Chip Zdarsky**
- Artist **Daniel Acuña**

ISSUES 1-3 **Dark superhero** futures never go out of style, but they also need something fresh to stand out from the crowd. Chip Zdarsky's six-issue miniseries tries to supply this by taking aim at politically resonant themes, while also delivering superhero action.

In a potential dystopian future, an ageing Steve Rogers is living a quiet married life, having been stripped of his super-soldier powers. However, when he discovers that old friends like Luke Cage have formed a resistance against the totalitarian government, Steve chooses to once again don the mantle of Captain America and fight injustice.

Three issues in, and the strengths of *Avengers: Twilight* are clear: when it works, it's an engaging thriller, tapping into the politics of resistance while still finding room for satisfying action sequences. None of this is revolutionary – there are echoes of everything from *The Dark Knight Returns* to recent Catwoman miniseries *Lonely City* – but the pacing is brisk, some sequences pack real impact, and it's gorgeous to look at, thanks to the stylised, characterful art from Daniel Acuña.

"The pacing is brisk and some sequences pack real impact"

Unfortunately, these strengths clash wildly with the goofier moments of comic-book storytelling, especially concerning the villains. Any ambiguity inevitably gets thrown out of the window when dealing with one-dimensional adversaries like the Red Skull and Ultron, blowing a hole in the attempts to tackle more serious themes.

Acuña's art is sensational, and the plot makes some interesting twists and turns, but right now this haphazard saga is suffering from a serious case of tonal whiplash. **Saxon Bullock**

i Zdarsky's favourite *The Simpsons* episode is "You Only Move Twice", where Homer gets a job working for a supervillain.

ESSENTIAL ROGUE TROOPER: GENETIC INFANTRYMAN

★★★★☆

- RELEASED **27 MARCH**
- Publisher **Rebellion**
- Writer **Gerry Finley-Day**
- Artists **Various**

COLLECTION **Given the recent** announcement of a CG movie adaptation directed by Duncan Jones, there's never been a better time to leap into the action-packed world of classic *2000 AD* adventure *Rogue Trooper*.

A dark tale of future war, set on the polluted and devastated Nu Earth, it concerns the last of the blue-skinned genetically engineered infantrymen known as "GIs". Created to survive Nu Earth's toxic atmosphere, they were slaughtered in the Quartz Massacre; the series follows the only survivor, as he hunts down the general responsible for betraying his comrades.

This ongoing quest for revenge threads together the episodic adventures collected here, resulting in plenty of *2000 AD*'s typical pitch-black humour and grim violence. We also get some fantastic art (presented here with added colour), with impressive work from *Watchmen*'s Dave Gibbons, alongside eye-catching visuals from other early *2000 AD* artists like Colin Wilson and Cam Kennedy.

While these earliest *Rogue* adventures are dated and clunky at times, their pulpy energy and bleak, ultra-British take on the horrors of war still grab the attention. The first volume in a series, this 188-page collection is a great jumping-on point. **Saxon Bullock**

FINAL FANTASY VII REBIRTH

Middle part remake isn't middling

★★★★½

RELEASED **OUT NOW!**

Reviewed on **PS5**

Publisher **Square Enix**

VIDEOGAME **Gaming has come a** long way since 1997. What was once an abstracted RPG overworld on the PlayStation – a simple stage for your chibi character to run between towns and get into battles – is now rendered in extreme detail in *Rebirth*, the middle entry of this remake trilogy.

Not only does that mean huge areas to explore as you journey across this fantasy world, but greater depth to characters' emotional journeys, and battles that are now truly epic in scale.

This part of the story sees ecoterrorists AVALANCHE fleeing the high-tech city of Midgar. They're hot on the heels of Sephiroth, a robed menace attempting to take advantage of the planet's already weakened state due to unchecked industrialisation, in order to destroy it and then rebuild in his own twisted image. He leaves one long trail for AVALANCHE to pursue, but each area the party ventures to manages to feel unique, dealing with the oncoming catastrophe in their own ways.

The approach to the open world shifts as you progress too, with each region designed in different ways. While side activities come from the same mould (scanning crystals, taking on challenging fiends and so on), the structure of your journey through them can be quite different. For instance, the twisting trees and cliffs of the jungle region Gongaga become easier to navigate once you've tamed that area's chocobo mount. Side content is largely optional, with the option to return to past areas as you progress building a sense of a large, connected world.

Combat is better than ever, returning to the real-time hack and slash system, mixed with the ability to slow the action to issue commands for bigger moves. Having made more allies, there's not just more characters to play as, but more ways for everyone to come together in combat. Synergy skills allow for instant tag-team moves, like hurling a friend into the air to clobber some magical bats, or getting between you and an enemy to shield damage.

While the overall story here does suffer from "middle entry" fatigue (it's no *The Empire Strikes Back*), *FFVII Rebirth* raises the genre's bar for RPG open worlds, combat, and characterisation – no mean feat for a '90s throwback.

Oscar Taylor-Kent

i Timey-wimey bits make this remake sort of a pseudo-sequel as well – though you don't need to have played the original.

"Right over *there*? Ah sod this, I'm going back to bed."

RECORD STORE DAY

The vinyl-geek event returns on 20 April. Here's a few highlights you may deem worth queuing for

THE ROCKY HORROR SHOW – RICHARD O'BRIEN

This is the original demo tape (complete with linking commentary) made for the Royal Court Theatre which secured creator Richard O'Brien the gig back in 1974. Includes a few interesting variations, but no "Time Warp" – presumably that hadn't been written yet!

UFO – THE BARRY GRAY ORCHESTRA

In 2019, Silva Screen brought out a 20-track collection of the music for the Gerry Anderson series about a secret organisation combatting organ-stealing aliens. This 7" single – pressed on "transparent violet" vinyl – has the main/end titles music on side A, with incidental music variations of the theme on the flip. Also available: a *Stingray* 7".

VIRUS SOUNDTRACK

You may know this 1980 Italian zombie horror by alternate titles like *Zombie Creeping Flesh*. Its soundtrack combines cues taken from other scores by prog-rockers Goblin with a theme borrowed from a 1977 noir and original compositions (largely "tribal" percussion). Comes on orange vinyl.

THE WICKER MAN EP – KATY J PEARSON & FRIENDS

If you bought StudioCanal's four-disc *Wicker Man* box set last year, you'll have this on CD. The nine tracks include folky versions of soundtrack cuts like "Fire Leap" and "Willow's Song", plus a couple of remixes. This vinyl exclusive is limited to just 500 copies – best of luck!

BANISHERS: GHOSTS OF NEW EDEN

Till death don't us part

★★★☆☆

- RELEASED **OUT NOW!**
- Reviewed on **PS5**
- Also on **PC, Xbox Series X|S**
- Publisher **Focus Entertainment**

VIDEOGAME **Love is in the air in** this open-world adventure, but it soon comes crashing down to Earth. The titular banishers, a pair of 17th-century ghost hunters, are also a happy couple – at least for the opening hour or so. Arriving in New England to investigate a curse, experienced ghostbuster Antea Duarte is tragically killed, and spends the rest of the game in spirit form, aiding her apprentice Red McRaith.

This premise is *Banishers*' main strength, ably sold by the sharp script and voice performances. Red and Antea are palpably desperate to stay together, but know that a banisher's calling is to send spirits to the afterlife. The plot thus serves up a dilemma: will you attempt to resurrect Antea in the game's finale or let her go?

"I see dead people. Hang on, I *am* dead people."

If that sounds like a no-brainer, the result depends on decisions you make in various haunting cases about the region, all ethically thorny in their own right, with resurrection dependent on your willingness to sacrifice the living.

As intriguing as these stakes are, however, the action around them is decidedly less so. From investigations to exploring to crafting, there's a lot of mundane legwork for Red to endure, and Antea's spirit powers are little more than keys to dissolve blockages along the way.

Combat, which involves switching between the duo, is diverting enough but repetitive, with similar ghouls and spectres recycled ad nauseam.

While Red and Antea's relationship remains touching to the end, then, a banisher's work can feel somewhat lifeless.

Jon Bailes

ℹ Developer Dontnod sees *Banishers* as a spiritual successor to 2018 game *Vampyr*, where undead ethics also featured.

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Blastermind
The SFX quiz

IRELAND

Hopefully you are now sufficiently recovered from St Patrick's Day to test your knowledge of all things Éire...

Quizmaster ***Ian Berriman, Deputy Editor***

QUESTION 1
In which episode of a *Star Trek* series did Miles O'Brien make his first appearance?

QUESTION 2
What's the real name of the County Mayo-born X-Man, Banshee?

QUESTION 3
For which YA series is the author Eoin Colfer best known?

QUESTION 4 Picture Question
Identify this Irish-set horror from a detail of the poster.

QUESTION 5
Which Irish author wrote *The Jewel Of Seven Stars* and *The Lair Of The White Worm*?

QUESTION 6
Name the director of *The Company Of Wolves*, *Interview With The Vampire* and *Byzantium*.

QUESTION 7
What was the surname of the Irishman who tormented James T Kirk with practical jokes at Starfleet Academy?

QUESTION 8 Picture Question
Name this movie, shot around County Wicklow.

QUESTION 9
In the *Doctor Who* episode "Ascension Of The Cybermen", we see the life story of Brendan, a man abandoned as a baby. What job does he grow up to have?

QUESTION 10
Shot in County Donegal, what was the first theatrical movie from Hammer Films to go before the cameras in nearly 30 years?

QUESTION 11
Name one of the two sci-fi series to which TV writer Johnny Byrne contributed.

QUESTION 12 Picture Question
Name this Irish monster horror-comedy.

QUESTION 13
What's the title of the *Star Trek: Voyager* episode centred on a holodeck recreation of a 19th century Irish village? Clue: it's the name of the village.

QUESTION 14
Who played the title role in the 1993 horror-comedy *Leprechaun*?

QUESTION 15
Born in 18th century Ireland, Angel went by another name before he was turned into a vampire. What was it?

QUESTION 16 Picture Question
Name this Irish-set fantasy film.

QUESTION 17
For which tale about a vampire is the Irish author Sheridan Le Fanu best known?

QUESTION 18
He may be from the planet Ultron, but he certainly *sounds* Irish... What's the name of the superhero played by Ardal O'Hanlon in '00s sitcom *My Hero*?

QUESTION 19
Which Irish actor connects *28 Days Later*, *Batman Begins* and *A Quiet Place Part II*?

QUESTION 20
According to the *Star Trek: The Next Generation* episode "The High Ground", in what year does Irish reunification take place?

Answers
1 "Encounter At Farpoint" 2 Sean Cassidy 3 Artemis Fowl 4 *Rawhead Rex* 5 Bram Stoker 6 Neil Jordan 7 Finnegan 8 *Zardoz* 9 A Garda officer 10 *Wake Wood* 11 *Space: 1999*/*Doctor Who* 12 *Grabbers* 13 "Fair Haven" 14 Warwick Davis 15 Liam 16 *The Secret Of Kells* 17 *Carmilla* 18 Thermoman 19 Cillian Murphy 20 2024

How did you do?

What's your Irishman IQ?

0-5 Father Dougal

6-10 Jimmy Cricket

11-15 Terry Wogan

16-19 WB Yeats

20 Robert Boyle

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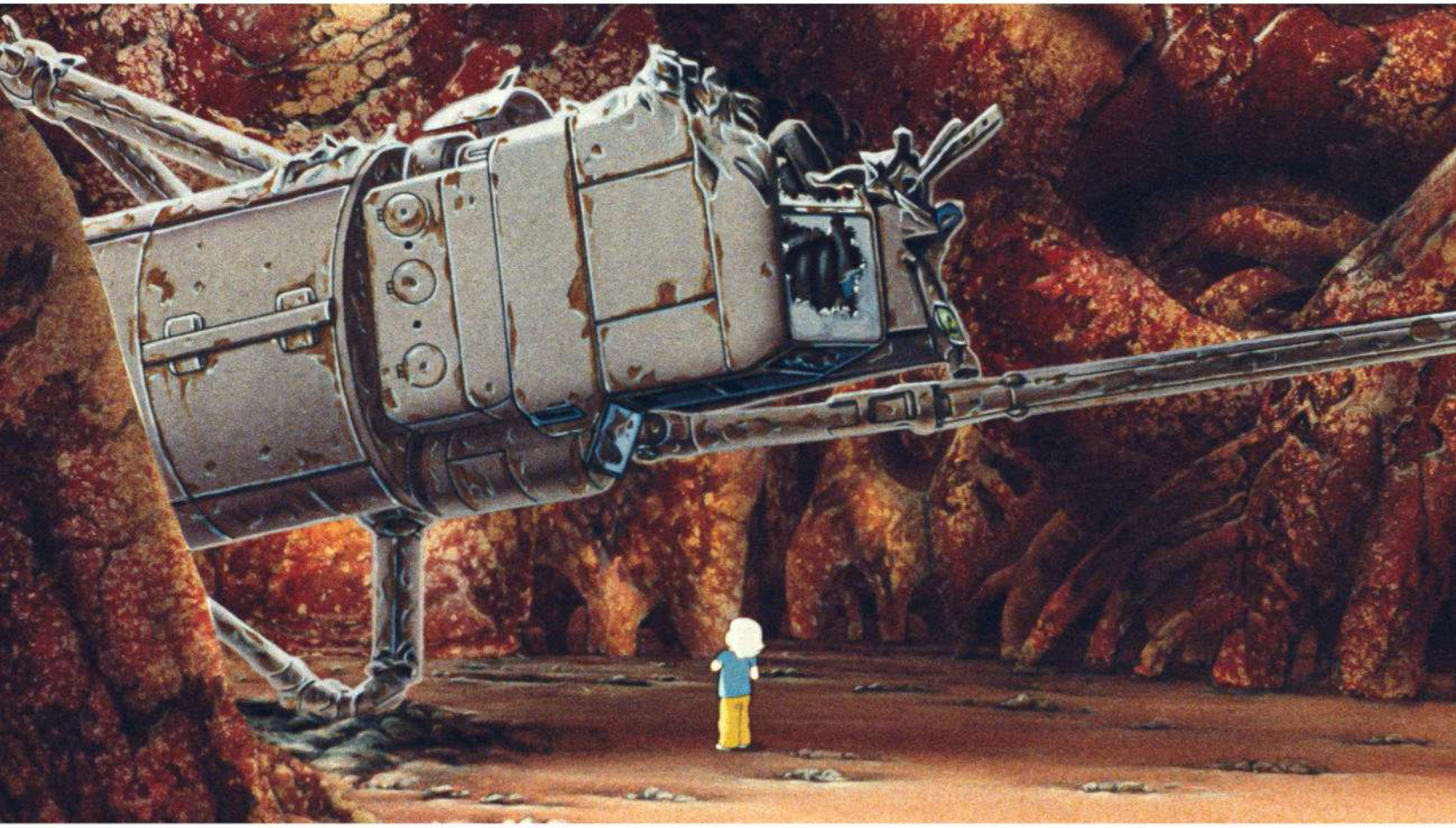
Personal recollections of cherished sci-fi and fantasy



Les Maîtres Du Temps

David West, freelance writer

As a youngster, I'd watch anything animated. Saturday mornings were for cartoons, particularly repeats of Hanna-Barbera shows like *Samson & Goliath*, *The Herculoids* and *Mightor*. Something in that mould was probably what I was expecting when I saw *Time Masters* (as it was titled by co-producers the BBC) listed in the *Radio Times*. A sci-fi adventure about a rescue mission to save a boy stranded on a strange planet sounded like perfect viewing.

On a superficial level, it could be argued that French animator René Laloux delivered a family-friendly tale. There's a cute, mop-topped kid called Piel, alone and in peril on the planet Perdide as the crew of the ship Double Triangle 22 race across the galaxy, hoping to ride a comet's wake to reach him in time.

But the movie just looked *weird*, and terrible things kept happening. French comic artist Moebius served as designer, creating strange landscapes rendered in beautiful pastel shades and populated by bizarre creatures. The ship's captain, Jaffar, looks like a space version of Aragorn from Ralph Bakshi's *The Lord Of The Rings* with his square jaw and muscles, yet the script denies him the opportunity to play the hero. It falls to a stranger to rescue Piel after Jaffar is distracted by the schemes of Matton, a narcissistic prince on the run with a stolen fortune.

There's a subplot about a planet populated by faceless winged beings that seek to erase all individuality and absorb everyone into a collective hive mind. Laloux would return to this theme about the loss of agency in 1987's *Gandahar*, and its presence here added another unsettling layer to the experience. Two little humanoids called Jad and Yula serve almost as comic relief, but they're psychic and constantly complain about the evil thoughts of the humans around them.

Piel also encounters a friendly creature called a Wah-Wah that allows him to ride on its back, which is charming right up until the moment Piel's pal is strangled and eaten by a tentacle monster. In that instant, *Les Maîtres Du Temps* was seared into my young brain, and has remained there ever since.

David remains forever scarred by his phobia of tentacle monsters.

Fact Attack!

- Both *Les Maîtres Du Temps* and Laloux's 1973 film *Fantastic Planet* were adapted from the works of dentist turned novelist Stefan Wul.
- "Perdide" is French for lost, an adjective applicable to both the planet and Piel, too young to comprehend his predicament.
- In addition to Bakshi's Aragorn, Jaffar's appearance recalls the hero of the comic *Blueberry* by Moebius and Jean-Michel Charlier.
- The film belittles fascism through black-clad, jack-booted soldiers who perform a Nazi-style salute, but are easily outsmarted by Jaffar.
- Moebius was the production designer on Luc Besson's *The Fifth Element*, whose visual style seems influenced by Laloux's films.

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